PENGUIN CLASSICS

NO GLORY

ObsidianPen

No Glory

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All-Time Favorite Works, My Heart Adores, BestofBest, Fan Favorites, Favorite Harry Potter Fanfics, i have seen your heart and it is mine, Прочитано и жду продолжения, Everlasting Harrymort and Tomarry, Harrymort/Tomarry Recs for the Soul, Lady Bibliophile's Collection of Incredible Fanfiction, HP Soul Bonds, Harry is LVs Prisonee, Favorite, cream of the crop, Incomplete Fics to Track, Phoenix's Read But Not Complete List | Not Updated,

Phoenix's Currently Reading List | On Going, hp stories, Love, tomarry at its finest, Phoenix tears and Basilisk venom, Tomarry fics that are Good and I think you should read :), Favorite Works Over The Years, Mine: in body; mind & soul [TMRR], Amarillie Harry Potter Fanfictions, Tomarry\Harrymort, Unforgettable Harry Potter Fanfiction, don't get me started, dawn goes down to day, Reasons I don't have a Life :), Fanfics That I Would Marry Forever And Ever, Best Tomarry, Works of Great Quality Across the Fandoms, My soul and heart love Tomarry, Ongoing fic, smextimes, HP_WIP_to_die_for, Fics That Make My Brain Rot, THE 🎵 UBIQ □ ☠ THE 🎭 UNIQUE 🏵, Incontrovertible_Masterpiece, Ash’s cute n good fics (warning may not be cute), Laurel's Favourite Fiction, 🔵 ***Dark Matter*** 🔵, my bookshelf of all the greatests, THE COLLECTION THIS APPLE WOULD KILL FOR, the best of tomarry □, Pretty, For happy life, FICS (of everything) that I would read again, Best long Tomarrymort fics, Tomarry works, Rien's Bookshelf, best fics to ever exist, HP fics I loved enough to save, Always, Completed stories I've read, harry potter angst, hp fics that i would condemn my soul for, JustFabulous' Favorites, Falling Like The Stars - Beautiful Romances, HIS CHOSEN ONE, fics that can't get out of my mind, Tomarry Get Married!, Arcturus' Treasure Hoard, Tomarry Faves□, tomarry fics that have my whole heart, fics that kept me staring at my screen all night, I can touch you now, Works that haunt me, idk, Tom Riddle rabbit hole jump at your own risk

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by ObsidianPen

Summary

The Dark Lord divines what Harry Potter is in the Forbidden Forest, and revelations lead to incomprehensible consequences. Lord Voldemort has won... and the dystopia is damning.

A tale of a fallen hero, dark desires, and a Dark Lord's obsession with something he has lost and finds himself unwillingly lusting after: a soul.

- Translation into Русский available: No Glory by julieestmignonne
- Translation into Français available: No Glory - Traduction française by TheoShip
- Translation into Português brasileiro available: No Glory by MinKat
- Translation into Bahasa Indonesia available: Tiada Kemuliaan (No Glory) by Anonymous

The Flaw in the Plan

Chapter Notes

Deathly Hallows AU, canon compliant up until the Forest scene with a few exceptions. Fred is alive... because I want him to be. No other reason, really.

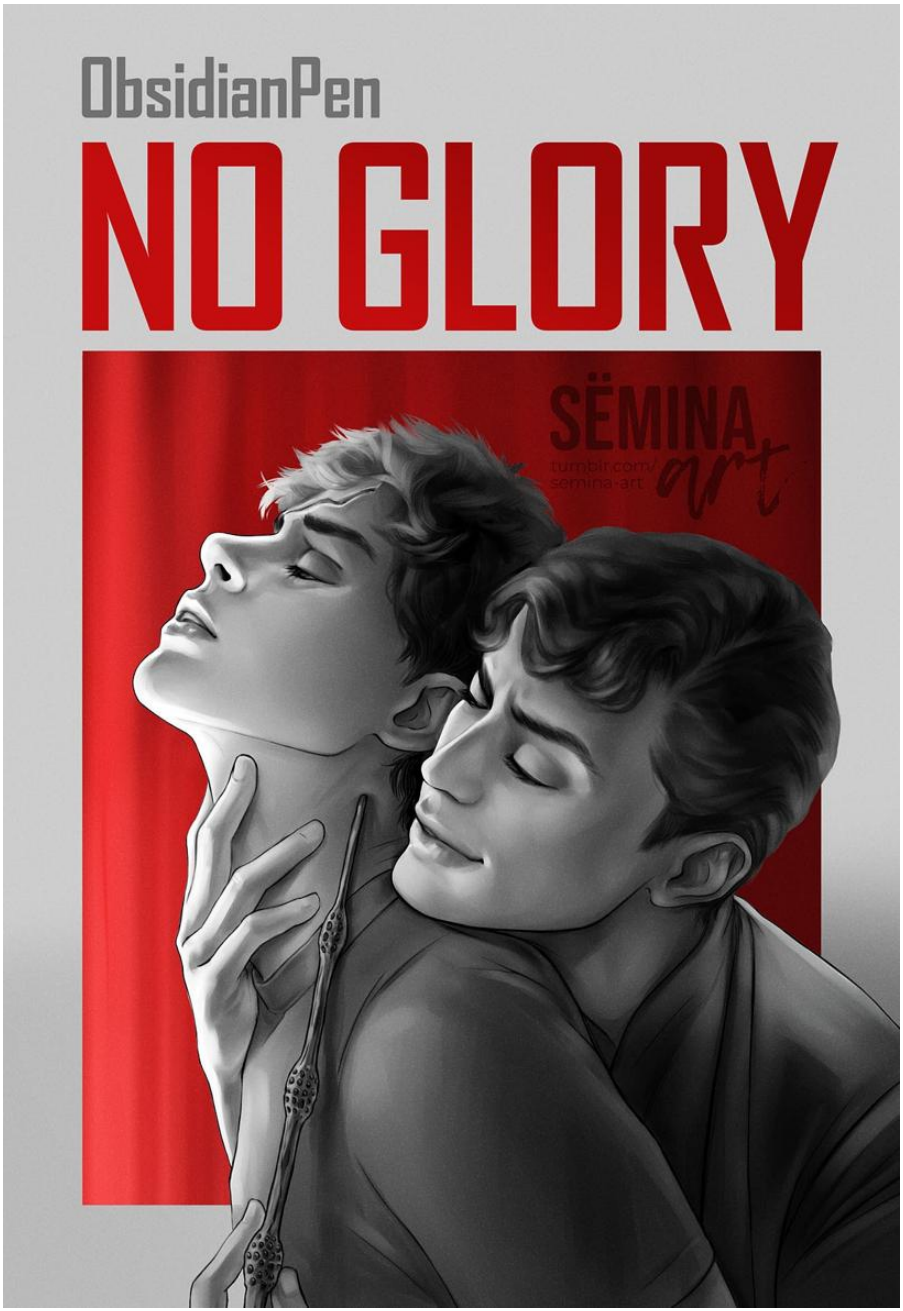
This story is dark. Heed the tags.

Movie trailer edit by Jaleesa

Translation into Russian on ficbook

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Art by lumoxy



Art by Semina.art

There was no glory in this.

Harry stood on shaking legs, fingers quivering at his sides. His hands were empty. The stone had been dropped in the woods, lost to grass and sticks and dirt. His wand was resting in his pocket, but it may as well have been on the other side of the world.

He would not reach for it. He would not defend himself.

There was no glory in this.

"…Harry Potter…"

Lord Voldemort was a distorted, serpentine apparition on the other side of a veil of smoke. His voice was a whisper, a frigid hiss interwoven with the light crackling of the flames.

"…The Boy Who Lived…"

There was no one else.

The Death Eaters fell away, the sounds of Hagrid's muffled shouts became silenced. There was a dying fire, a fractured wizard, and a trembling boy who was now a man with his chin jutted forward and his head held high.

The Dark Lord tilted his face to one side almost imperceptibly. Pensively.

Harry waited for death. Voldemort lifted his wand, and Harry's thoughts spun with a velocity that painted the world in an adrenaline-soaked blur. His fingers twitched but he did not let his body betray him. He would not move to protect himself. Harry awaited the blow of the killing curse, the end of it all; he would look death in the face unflinchingly, with eyes wide open.

"*Legilimens."*

The *wrong curse*.

Harry Potter fell into himself.

The Dark Lord's mental claws reached in and tore their way through Harry's psyche, dragging him down into his memories in a whirlwind of pain.

…Lightning flashes of Harry as an infant, wailing in his crib while a man in black robes kneels on the floor at his side, sobbing equally hard, ignoring the baby's cries as he clutches a woman to his chest…

Beautiful and crimson, delicate and dead…

…Harry as a child, eleven years old and his scar on fire as a stone manifests in his pocket…

…The scar, always his scar—memories of its pain and its occasional, accompanied emotions. Voldemort was following that neurological pathway and Harry was being strung along for the ride. He tried to fight it, to shake the Dark Lord off, but it was hopeless.

No, he thought, horrified, as Voldemort edged closer and closer to the most damning of realizations.

No. No. No.

The Dark Lord's power was earth-shattering, devastating. Harry could feel the ghost of an emotion that resembled joy at his pain.

Yes.

…Harry convulsing on the floor of the Ministry of Magic, burning alive in a scorching pyre of agony as the Dark Lord spoke with his lips, begged with his voice for a death which was denied him…

…Sixteen, and feeling detached emotions coursing through his mind in waves of fury, fear and happiness…

No, no, no—

…Seventeen, and realizing that the Dark Lord had finally divined where the Deathstick rested, at last, at last…

...Hallows or horcruxes, hallows or horcruxes…

No, no, no—

...Hidden underneath of a floorboard, only an inch of rotting wood between Harry James Potter and Lord Voldemort himself… Severus Snape begged, but his pleas fell on deaf ears…

'*I regret it.*'

He didn't.

Snape's memories were siphoned into a glass chalice, and Hermione Granger was offering them up into the Chosen One's hands—

No—

Yes.

Harry's memories dissolved into Severus Snape's memories, and the rabbit hole of the past became amplified.

Severus and Lily. Severus and Lily. Severus and Lily. Unrequited love that told the tale of a traitor in Lord Voldemort's midst.

Severus Snape… had managed the impossible task of deceiving the Dark Lord…

Harry snapped his eyes shut, using every inch of resistance that he had left. He reached for his wand, fumbling through his robes with desperate hands that trembled like a child who was freezing to death.

Lord Voldemort reacted so swiftly it was inhuman. One second, he was a distorted white phantom on the other side of the fire; the next, he was there, *right there*, a mere inch in front of Harry. A pale hand snatched at his face like a viper, sharp nails sinking into the skin of his cheeks and forcing his jaw up so that when Harry's eyes instinctively flew open, they were met with a searing, crimson gaze, so close, frighteningly close.

"*Show me."*

There was nothing he could do. Harry couldn't even scream as the Dark Lord once more ripped open his unwilling mind.

…The ghost-like memory of Albus Dumbledore proclaimed his damnation to a horrified Severus Snape… and it was over.

Horcrux.

Harry was wrenched back into reality. Voldemort kept ahold of his face, staring at him. Not hostile. Not murderous, not angry.

Analytical. His eyes were sharp and searching, despite their stillness.

The silence was suffocating in every conceivable way. Harry could barely breathe as the Dark Lord held him there, frozen by red eyes and snow white fingers wrapped around his jaw.

"…Kill me."

Harry finally choked the words out in a raspy voice. A plea. A

desperate request for the Dark Lord to do what he'd always wanted to do, what he'd been trying to do for as long as Harry Potter had been the object of a meaningless prophecy.

For a time, the Dark Lord did not react. He merely continued to stare at the Boy Who Lived with that inquisitive demeanor.

Then he smiled.

A small, crooked grin that made the already inhuman face of Lord Voldemort appear altogether demonic. He laughed so softly that Harry was sure no one else but he could hear it.

Voldemort's breath smelled like ice and blood.

The Dark Lord didn't move at all when he finally did speak. He kept Harry's eyes locked under his, pinned down with a stare. His next words, spoken loudly enough for all of his followers to hear, would be the declaration that ripped Harry Potter's world to shreds.

"A change of plans."

Chapter End Notes

fanart by Angel

fanart by arcturus-night-star

fanart by ladycynnara

Blood, Sweat, and Stone

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Do you see it, Harry Potter?"

Lord Voldemort swept behind Harry, but his hand never released his face. Voldemort's grip tightened even further as he wrenched Harry's jaw upwards, forcing him to look to the sky. The Dark Lord's voice was in his ear. His breath was cold.

"Do you see the stars, how they shine in my name? How the heavens bear my mark, how that great constellation rests above the castle like a glorious, celestial crown? How the blush in the sky foretells of a new dawn, a better dawn… *my dawn*… Do you see, Harry?"

The Dark Lord's other hand rested gently on his shoulder, a great contrast to the sharp nails on his face. Harry *could* see it, the Dark Mark above Hogwarts: orbs of light that glittered and sparkled with an unnatural, emerald hue. The sun was just beginning to rise, causing the sky in the east to bleed crimson into the navy of the night.

But Harry couldn't speak. His throat was far too raw, his mind far too shaken. Even if he could have formed words, Harry would have remained silent, for what could he possibly say?

What could he possibly say?

Harry's trembling hand was hovering over his robe pocket, like he might still attempt to reach for his wand and fight. He didn't. He was surrounded by Death Eaters; the Dark Lord himself was wrapped around his backside like a serpent. There was no hope.

Voldemort laughed at his silence. "Remember this," he whispered.

"Say farewell to the sky, Harry Potter…"

The brilliant stars dimmed.

Harry's knees buckled and his vision blurred. The sound of cruel, sadistic laughter sounded all around him, but it was strange and distorted, an abstract choir of mirth in a vast and empty chamber. The haunting sound followed him as darkness consumed him.

It was dark.

Harry sat on an ice-cold floor with his back against a wall of stone. His body ached everywhere. His neck, when he attempted to lift his chin, screamed in protest as he moved.

His *wrists*.

Harry's eyes flew open as full consciousness washed over him. His *wrists*, his wrists were shackled above his head in heavy, iron cuffs. He pulled down on them in a panic, only to be met with the biting sting of metal digging into his skin.

He exhaled sharply. The gasp echoed into the space which he realized, now, was a large cell.

A… familiar space.

Harry's eyes narrowed as he examined the floor, the walls, the tall, metal bars… and the realization came to him.

Malfoy Manor.

Harry forced back the bile that threatened to crawl its way up his throat. His mouth was terribly dry. He ran his tongue over his chapped lips, and it felt like sandpaper ghosting over spent charcoal. When he swallowed, it burned.

Dehydrated. He was extremely dehydrated.

Harry blinked dazedly in the dismal cell, his glasses somehow, thankfully, still perched on the brim of his nose. As his eyes adjusted, he looked down to see that he was in the same filthy robes that he'd been in before. The same clothes that he'd worn while battling at Hogwarts…

This singed fabric had seen the Fiendfyre of the Room of Requirement. This dark and dirty cloak had beheld chaos, war, and death.

This unraveling stitching had witnessed Harry Potter fail.

Harry pulled at his shackles again, ignoring the pain to the best of his ability. So weak, his entire body felt so weak. He was lightheaded after just a very short and pitiful attempt at standing. His ears rang with a dull buzz.

…What happened at Hogwarts?

What happened to his friends? To the Order? Were they still fighting? Was it all over?

Had… had Lord Voldemort really, truly won?

…*No.*

Harry yanked on his confinements again, biting his tongue to stop from crying out. The iron echoed dissonantly in the empty air.

No, no, no—

Footsteps.

Harry stopped struggling at once, his head snapping to the side towards where he could see a soft light approaching. Adrenaline exploded in his veins, bringing his foggy mind abruptly into focus. His chest was heaving with anticipation, his raw throat on fire with every breath—

Not him.

A woman.

Harry stared in some strange mixture of relief and anxiety at the lithe form of Narcissa Malfoy. She held her wand aloft, the light radiating from the tip illuminating her pale face dramatically on one side. Her blonde hair seemed more silver than gold in the magical glow.

She paused at the iron gate, staring down at him with an undecipherable expression on her face. Harry said nothing. He wouldn't have known what to say, even if he could speak.

There was a long moment of silence in which Narcissa remained still, simply looking at him. Then he realized what it was, the emotion simmering in the depths of her eyes.

Pity.

Narcissa pointed her lit-up wand at the lock. It clicked open and she entered, approaching Harry and kneeling down at his side. Harry recoiled away as far as he could at the unexpected advance. Her features softened into something much gentler.

"I won't hurt you," she whispered so quietly that he could hardly

discern the words. Then, to his astonishment, she reached forward and brushed his hair across his forehead, moving the tangled, sweaty locks out of his eyes. Harry was so stunned at the tender motion that he could do little more than gape at her.

"Draco has told me what you've done. How you saved him," she murmured. Her eyes scanned his forehead as she soothingly brushed the matted hair away, over his lightning bolt scar, until they landed on his. "I am in your debt. I will… I will do for you what I can."

Her voice broke and her face became deeply pitying again. Harry was beyond shocked at the concern that radiated around her, the aura of compassion that shone in her eyes.

There was a moment of stillness. Then, more footsteps. Much quieter this time, and no light to accompany them.

"He comes."

Narcissa was on her feet in an instant, standing over Harry and glaring down at him suddenly with a much more familiar look on her face. It was the same expression he'd seen on her before, like she was smelling something unpleasant. *Disgusted.*

A cold voice cut through the air like a broken sheet of ice.

"How does he fare?"

Narcissa raised her wand to shed light on the darkest wizard of all time.

Lord Voldemort stood tall and still in the open entryway. His white skin looked even more unnaturally pale in this setting, and his eyes—those disturbing, scarlet eyes—were as vivid as ever. Slit pupils sliced them in half, two black slivers of impenetrable darkness.

"He's well enough, my Lord," Narcissa sneered, glowering down at Harry.

Voldemort said nothing in response. His gaze settled on his victim, and Harry's muscles tensed under the clinical stare.

He smirked.

"…Harry Potter…" Voldemort said softly. He approached him, and soon he was in the exact same position that Narcissa had been in just

moments before, leaning down over Harry so that their eyes were level.

Harry flinched from the sudden proximity as raw, undiluted fear licked its way up his spine. The iron shackles banged against the stone wall behind him.

The Dark Lord's malevolent grin widened.

"Leave us."

Narcissa bowed before she left, taking the light with her. The world—Harry's entire, bleak, hopeless world—seemed even more horrific in the darkness.

"Harry Potter…"

Voldemort repeated his name slowly, like the words had flavor and he was savoring the taste of them on his tongue. His head tilted to one side, and Harry was sure that, were his skin not so deathly bright and pale, he would be able to make out nothing other than those scorching red eyes.

"What to do with you?"

Harry swallowed thickly, yet for some reason—some *insane* reason—the Dark Lord's condescending and rhetorical question had caused him to find his voice.

"What happened?"

Harry's words sounded frayed, raspy; syllables coated in the ashes left behind by his burning throat.

Voldemort took his time in answering. With each passing second, Harry felt his anxiety mounting, his terror reaching thresholds unknown to him before.

"…What happened…" the Dark Lord echoed quietly. His grin slipped away.

"I have won, Harry Potter…"

He reached forward, touching the tips of his icy fingers to the scar on Harry's forehead. Though it was an action very similar to what Narcissa Malfoy had just done, the effect could not have been more different. Harry braced himself for pain, searing pain, just as when he

had touched him before, like always—

None came. And as Harry thought about it, he realized that there had been no pain in the forest either, when Voldemort had gripped his jaw so tightly it must have nearly drawn blood.

No pain.

"I have won," Voldemort murmured. "The Order has fallen… The most intelligent of your comrades have surrendered, the foolish ones have fled… but Lord Voldemort will find them… No one can outrun *my* wrath, *my* justice…"

He pulled his hand away from Harry's forehead. His eyes remained fixed on his own, steady and unblinking.

"Who—who…?"

Voldemort laughed when Harry's words failed him. "Perpetually concerned for the welfare of your inferiors, Harry. That has always been your downfall. Just as I told you before… Lord Voldemort knew it then, as he knows it now… *Pathetic*…"

"No," Harry spat, and a sudden reckless fury gripped him. "Friendship is *not* pathetic. Not that I would expect you to know. You're heartless. Soulless… *almost*."

The Dark Lord's eyes widened at Harry's sudden daring, then narrowed into a glare. A wand was jabbed into the flesh of his throat a moment later, and Voldemort's anger was tangibly saturating the air in the cell. It was terrifying, and yet, insanely, at the same time… satisfying. Harry smirked.

"If you say anything like that *ever* again, you will pay for it dearly," Voldemort seethed, his icy breath dancing across Harry's dry and chapped lips.

Harry only grinned a bit broader. He was unsurprised when, a moment later, rather than curse him, Voldemort had risen and was making a swift and silent exit.

"What is it?" Harry called before he made it to the gate. Voldemort's tall form froze in the entryway. "Scared that if you curse me, you might hurt it? This little fraction of your soul that's in me?"

Harry let out a bitter laugh. He was filled with a resentment so

terrible that it clouded his mind.

"Are you *afraid*, Tom?"

Voldemort turned in a flash of blood-red rage.

"*Crucio!"*

Screams, terrible and painful and searing in his chest, tore their way out of his throat. Harry's entire body burned from his lungs to his lips, and the pain, the pain was *everywhere*. It crawled over his skin in waves of agony. It ripped its way through him from the inside out. The shackles clanged together vociferously behind him as he flailed.

He screamed until he couldn't anymore. Voldemort did not lift the curse for what felt like an eternity, but Harry could not be sure how long he was forced to endure it. Time held no meaning in the midst of such torture.

Finally, Voldemort ended his onslaught. Harry's muscles quivered in the aftereffects of the curse, his robes drenched in a cold sweat. He hacked up copious amount of blood.

…But the salty flavor in his mouth tasted like *victory*.

At some point, Harry wasn't even sure when or how, his spluttering coughs transitioned into fragmented, delirious laughter. The Dark Lord stood motionless in the entryway, cold and silent.

"I knew it," Harry spat out in a voice that was somehow both weaker and more determined than before. He stared boldly up into Voldemort's mask-like face.

"You're *weak*."

For a long moment, Lord Voldemort said nothing. Harry coughed some more, splattering his robes and the stone floor around him with blood.

Eventually, Voldemort approached him again. The Dark Lord lowered himself so that his face was once more close to Harry's. His spluttering ceased at once, like Voldemort had cast some wordless and wandless spell to freeze his body, including even his lungs.

"That…" Voldemort began softly, his tone cold. His red eyes were *smoldering*.

"…will be the insult which you will regret for the rest of your life."

And then he was gone, departing in a motion that happened so quickly that Harry barely felt the breeze from his robes flutter over his skin. Lord Voldemort disappeared into the shadows, vanishing even before the door to his cell swung shut with a resounding *bang*.

Harry Potter was left alone in the dark, surrounded by nothing but blood, sweat, and stone.

Chapter End Notes

Fanart by antinatalie

Mercy

The darkness, the stillness, the cold…

Harry was suffocating in it.

Once he'd finally managed to stop hacking up blood, his world fell into a deep and unnerving silence. The cacophony of sounds that his own body made was all that he could hear. His ragged breathing. The thumping of his heart that said with every beat:

Alive. Alive. Alive.

He shouldn't be.

Harry rested the back of his head against the wall, peering up at a stone ceiling he could hardly make out through the bleakness. He may have stopped coughing, but his body was still trembling. Whether it was from the after-effects of the Cruciatus Curse or the cold, he couldn't be sure. Perhaps both.

How long had Voldemort been gone? What had he meant with those final parting words? That terrifying threat? Harry could barely focus his addled thoughts on it. He was so drained—emotionally, mentally, physically. He had no energy left for lucidity, no vigor left for fear or courage, for fight or flight.

He was just drifting off into unconsciousness when a familiar, dull light woke him. It was soft, but even the small glow made Harry's mind fill with something like relief.

Narcissa.

She had returned, and Harry knew immediately that she was alone, because her face was compassionate once more. She entered the cell. In one hand she held her illuminated wand high, in the other, a goblet. She knelt at Harry's side.

"Aguamenti."

The goblet filled with water, and Harry's dry throat ignited with fierce need at the sight.

She raised the brim of the cup to his lips, and he drank as deeply as he could—a man literally dying from thirst. He nearly growled when she

pulled it away after only a moment.

"Slowly," she said kindly but firmly. And it proved to be sage advice, for Harry started coughing, having nearly choked when he tried to swallow.

Narcissa waited patiently for him to stop so that he could try again. This time, when she lifted the goblet, he forced himself to drink gradually, but soon, much too soon, the cup ran dry. He moaned when she took it away.

"More," he gasped, licking the last drops from his chapped lips.

"Not yet." She set the goblet aside. "If you drink too much too quickly, you may not be able to keep it down. You're injured. You must move slowly, or you will come undone."

Her eyes roved over his trembling body. Harry wondered if she had heard his screams earlier, if they had carried out of the cell and up into the halls of the Malfoy Manor. Were Lucius and Draco home as well? Others?

Had they all heard the cries being ripped from the supposed Chosen One's lips?

Narcissa brushed the hair from his eyes again in a tender, motherly way. "Poor child," she whispered. "I am… so sorry."

Harry stared at her, amazed at how one cup of water affected him so profoundly. His mind, while still a bit foggy, was already much clearer than it had been just moments ago.

"What's… what's happened?"

His throat flared up in protest when he spoke, but he ignored the pain. He needed to ask, to know. "Who's died, who's—"

"Shhh…" Narcissa quieted him as she continued to detangle his matted hair. However, to Harry's extreme relief, she acknowledged his plea for knowledge and explained.

"Your friends, Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley… They've fled. As have most of the Order of the Phoenix. Everyone else who sided with them before has now surrendered. The Dark Lord is being merciful. He is pardoning most all who swear fealty to his regime… He does not wish to see any more magical blood spilt…"

Harry felt an intense rush of relief. Ron and Hermione… They'd managed to escape, to run…

Because he knew, without a doubt, that once the Dark Lord discovered that the three of them had been destroying his horcruxes… There would be no 'pardon' for the likes of Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley. The only reason that he, Harry, was alive was because he just so happened to be one of them.

"…Does everyone think I'm dead?"

It was the only thing that Harry could think that the Dark Lord would do. What better way to destroy all hope for the side of the light than by proclaiming that their supposed hero was dead? Maybe he transfigured a branch or something after Harry had passed out. A fake body to fool the masses…

He was surprised when Narcissa shook her head. "No. He has told them that you fled. That you abandoned them when you were summoned to the Forest."

Harry's eyes widened in shock. His mind raced. Why would the Dark Lord do that? If Voldemort had told the whole world that he was on the run... Then Hermione and Ron...

A lump formed in his throat. Without question, he knew that his two best friends would tear the world apart to find him. They would stop at nothing to help him, because they were so true and loyal and good and brave and—

And they would probably slip up at some point when they became desperate, and the Dark Lord would find them.

Narcissa's eyes darkened in understanding.

"You have to help me," Harry choked out. "You have to help me get out of here—they'll never stop looking for me, and he'll find them, he'll kill them, h-he'll kill them…"

He knew it was hopeless before she even spoke. Her conflicted expression grew only more pronounced.

"I can't, child," she said, and she truly did sound remorseful. "I can't. You must understand. He would kill us all."

And of course Harry knew that was the truth. His vision blurred as

tears gathered at the corners of his eyes. He blinked them away.

"Oh, child." Narcissa's voice broke, and Harry was momentarily distracted from his fear by the most shocking of actions. Narcissa Malfoy put her arms around him, wrapping him in an embrace.

For a second, Harry's body tensed. He was unsure of how to react to this—being held by this regal and austere woman while shackled to the wall—but then something broke in him, and he found that he was burying his head into the crook of her shoulder, attempting and failing to stifle a few wet, painful sobs.

She did not hold him for long. "Here. Drink more. We don't have much time, I'm afraid." Her hand was shaking slightly as she refilled the cup with her gently glowing wand. "I would help more, I would fix your clothes and loosen your shackles, but I cannot—he would know, and —"

She stopped short, offering up the goblet instead. Harry drank as quickly as he dared. It was heaven pouring down his throat, paradise on his tongue. Water, blessed water. It was life, and his mind was even clearer by the time he was finished with the second glass.

"Is he going to punish you? To be angry?" Harry asked in a voice that was still quite raspy. "If… if he finds out you've even given me something t-to drink?"

"No." Narcissa refilled the goblet one more time. "Keeping you well is a task I have been given. But kindness…"

Harry understood. She lifted the cup to his lips again and he drank deeply.

"I must go." She vanished the goblet and got to her feet. Her silvery eyes, so like her son's, were glistening with unshed tears. The conflict and fear in them, in combination with her next words, made Harry's stomach drop.

"He will be here soon, and—and... Oh, child."

Her voice had waned to something barely above a whisper. She turned and headed towards the iron gate, apparently unable to look at him a moment longer.

"I'm sorry."

And Harry was left by himself in the cold and the dark, lost in his own silence and fear.

He wasn't alone for long.

This time, the light that alerted him to the presence of another being was accompanied by a myriad of sounds. Stumbling footsteps; pitiful, desperate, incomprehensible shouts; and worst, worst of all, the worst sound in all of existence—

Laughter.

High, maniacal. Feminine.

Harry would know that cackling anywhere.

Harry's aching body bristled at the sound of her approach. He pushed himself up against the wall as hard as he could, yanking on his restraints.

But it wasn't just Bellatrix Lestrange who came into view. Harry's heart, which had been hammering wildly with dreadful anticipation, froze at who was shoved forward the moment his cell door was swung open.

Neville Longbottom fell into a pile at his feet, sprawling out onto the stone floor of his confinement. He was shaking and pale and looked utterly horrified, but otherwise appeared unharmed. His eyes snapped up to Harry's as he tried—and failed—to stand.

"Neville," Harry breathed in disbelief.

"H-Harry."

His round, ashen face broke out into a smile. "You are alive," he gasped, looking amazed.

"Aw, isn't this just *sweet*."

Bellatrix's voice was a saccharine drawl, that horrid baby-talk that made Harry's skin crawl. "Best friends, reunited. I am *filled* with emotion."

Harry glowered at her. She pointed her wand at a small sconce on the wall, filling the cell with a much brighter form of magical light before extinguishing the soft glow from her wandtip. She then twirled her

wand in her hand, smiling with brilliant red lips and shockingly white teeth.

Freedom suited Bellatrix Lestrange well. Other than the dark eyes and wild, black hair, there was little resemblance between the witch that he had met in the Department of Mysteries and the woman before him. The gauntness in her cheeks had vanished, the evidence of her years in Azkaban nearly gone.

Her smirk widened at Harry's glare. "Hello, Harry." She lost the baby-tone, choosing instead to address him in a voice that was practically a purr.

A wave of pure loathing rolled through him. "Don't you dare hurt him," Harry spat, yanking on his restraints.

"You Gryffindor children! So bold! Do you really think you are in any position to be giving orders, ickle Harry?" Bellatrix leaned over and poked him in the forehead with the tip of her wand. Harry had to resist the urge to attempt to bite her hand.

"There is a severe lack of respect and intelligence in these ones…"

Harry's hot rage went cold in an instant.

Voldemort surfaced from the shadows, having made no sound at all in his arrival. Neville let out a horrified whimper from where he still sat on the ground.

The Dark Lord's face was undecipherable, but his eyes were smoldering in what was palpable, overpowering hatred. And Harry was terrified, absolutely terrified, because that lethal gaze was not fixed on him… but on Neville.

Bellatrix was smiling, fingering the wand in her hand in excitement. "I know how to garner respect, my Lord…"

Voldemort's face remained impassive, his focus still on Neville. "Yes, Bellatrix… I am aware. And you shall… but first."

The Dark Lord swept further into the cell. Neville scrambled away, trembling violently.

"Neville Longbottom…"

Neville looked like he might pass out at being personally addressed by

Lord Voldemort, who towered over him, raw ire rolling off of his body in waves. "Why don't you tell Harry exactly why it is you are here? What it is you have done that has sealed your fate…?"

His scarlet eyes remained fixed on Neville, though he inclined his head slightly in Harry's direction. Neville's attention flickered to Harry. His face was contorted with fear. Voldemort waited for a moment, but Neville appeared to be rendered incapable of speech.

Bellatrix laughed again. Harry's panic-riddled mind was racing, looking at the form of his shaking friend and trying to think of some kind of miraculous plan of action that could get him out of there.

He could think of nothing.

"Say it."

Voldemort seethed the words with such venom that Harry's spine quivered. Neville whimpered again and flinched as though he'd just been struck, though Voldemort remained still and unmoving. Bellatrix fell silent.

"…What happened?"

Harry asked the question without meaning to. Neville's focus went to him, and it seemed that he was able to find something there, by looking into the eyes of Harry Potter, that gave him the ability to respond.

"I killed the snake."

A whisper, but his words echoed in the cell. Harry's jaw fell open in shock.

"And why, exactly, did you murder my Nagini, Neville Longbottom…?"

Neville looked at Voldemort again, but the dark wizard's attention appeared to paralyze him.

But he didn't need to say it. Harry already knew the answer. His heart sunk like a stone, because it was he, Harry, who had told Neville to kill the snake…

How he had managed it in the aftermath of the battle, Harry couldn't even fathom—but based on the way that Lord Voldemort was staring

at him, with that cold and merciless fury, he knew it must be true.

Voldemort's eyes finally flickered to Harry. "Because of the request of Harry Potter…" he hissed, choosing to answer his own question.

Dread ripped through him.

Neville was going to die.

"D-don't kill him," Harry begged at once. "Y-you're right, I t-told him to do it. Take it out on m-me instead—"

"I am not going to kill him." Voldemort said, his response eerily calm and composed.

"…You are."

"Wh…what?"

Voldemort's intense gaze fell back to Neville, but it was Harry he addressed. "We are going to play a game, Harry Potter," he said. Bellatrix was grinning like a madwoman at his side, red lips curled up in a smile.

"Here is how it will work. My dear Bellatrix has ample experience with the Longbottom family. I am sure you are aware of the mental condition of Alice and Frank Longbottom… Yet Neville, their young son, was left untouched. I am a wizard who does not like to leave things unfinished, Harry…"

His eyes flashed frighteningly as he looked down at his newest victim. "And I am curious, deeply curious. Will Neville Longbottom cling to sanity longer than his parents?"

He nodded almost unperceptively to Bellatrix, yet she instantly reacted, the motion she'd been waiting for.

"Crucio!"

Neville's screams saturated the air, and Harry lurched forward in his chains at the sound.

"Stop it! Stop it!" he shouted hoarsely. To his great surprise, Voldemort heeded his words. He lifted a hand in Bellatrix's direction a moment later, who, looking a bit disappointed, retracted the curse.

"P-please—" Harry started, but Voldemort spoke over him.

"We may not find out. I am not going to kill Neville Longbottom, no… But if he is lucky, you will." The Dark Lord stalked over to Harry until he was standing directly over him. "You can end his pain at any time, Harry. All you need to do is say the word, 'mercy'."

Harry shook his head in outright denial. "No. No, please don't do this, d-don't—"

Voldemort ignored him, gesturing again towards Bellatrix.

"Crucio!"

More screams of agony. Neville thrashed on the floor like a fish out of water; frantic, flailing, and desperate for air.

"Stop!" Harry yelled, but the Dark Lord had stepped away. He stood on the far side of the cell, allowing Bellatrix and her target to take up the majority of the space.

After a much longer time, she lifted the curse. "Oh, how I remember that night," she crooned down to a spluttering and shaking boy. Neville's eyes snapped open, and she smiled sadistically. "Oh, yes… Your father went first… Pathetic man, your father… Weak… Such a disappointment…"

"Fuck you."

Harry's brows shot up in disbelief at Neville's outburst. Bellatrix, too, looked shocked for a moment. Then she started laughing maniacally once more—but not for long. Her mirth transitioned seamlessly into rage.

"Crucio!"

"No!" Harry bellowed his protests again and again, but he was wholly ignored; Voldemort remained a still and emotionless spectator in the corner of the cell.

She took even longer to lift the curse this time. When she finally did, Neville was hacking blood. Harry's vision was blurring as unwanted tears began welling in his eyes.

"But your mother… Now *there* was a witch."

Bellatrix prowled around Neville's convulsing body like a predator circling its prey. Her heels clicked against the stone floor. "Much

stronger mind. Very resilient, very… *brave*.

She paused. "But, eventually, she began begging, too… *Crucio!"*

Useless. Harry's desperate pleas fell on deaf ears; Bellatrix never once looked at him. Neville's screams were becoming disjointed and fragmented.

Harry was looking at the Dark Lord when he begged, now.

"Please st-stop this."

Voldemort did nothing.

"And it was nowhere near as much fun once *she* started begging," Bellatrix went on after she'd lifted the curse, like she was having a perfectly normal, casual conversation. "It was quite a bore, once it was obvious that they didn't know anything about what happened to our Lord… though they were an excellent outlet for *my* suffering, for *my* pain…"

She sighed. "Do you know what your mummy begged for, ickle baby Longbottom?"

Neville's unfocused eyes stared up at her, but he said nothing. She leaned down over him so that her face was hovering over his.

"…Mercy."

The Cruciatus Curse was cast wordlessly this time. Bellatrix thrust her wand at him like she was snapping a whip, sending Neville flying forward and slamming against the wall before he began writhing and howling in pain on the floor again.

She held the curse for what felt like a lifetime. Harry had stopped with his stream of unheard pleas and was openly crying now, powerless to do anything to prevent what was happening. He couldn't utter the command to kill his friend, yet it was his fault that this was happening to him. He had been the one to tell him to kill Nagini… He couldn't, he wouldn't… He shut his eyes and felt hot tears drip down his face, fogging his glasses…

Harry hadn't even noticed when Bellatrix stopped the curse. Neville had lost his voice somewhere in the midst of it, finally losing the ability even to scream.

There was a long moment of quietness.

"….P…please…"

Neville Longbottom's small cry was barely discernible, even in the silence. Harry forced himself to open his eyes—to face what was happening.

Neville was looking right at him; blood dripped down his chin and splattered down the front of his robes.

"…It's okay," he whispered gutturally. "I… f-forgive you."

Another stretch of silence. Harry shook his head in refusal. "No," he gasped, looking back to the Dark Lord again. "No, you c-can't do this, don't—*please*—"

"Crucio!"

Neville let out one raspy howl of pain at Bellatrix's next curse before contorting in silent agony. His back arched in an unnatural curve, and his arms and legs jerked violently. His eyes rolled around in his skull in a rapid, sickening way. Harry roared his protest.

Lord Voldemort did nothing.

There was no hope. Horrible, dreadful, unwanted acceptance washed over his mind. Harry felt the heavy weight of guilt in his soul at what he knew was the only way to end his suffering.

It was only a single word, but it was easily the hardest thing that Harry had ever done. He closed his tear-filled eyes and bowed his head.

"…M-mercy."

Harry waited for the flash of green… but it didn't happen. The sound of thrashing limbs continued to assault his ears, despite his request.

He looked up. Bellatrix had madness simmering in her eyes as she continued to keep Neville under the Cruciatus Curse, ignoring Harry's word. Neville's mouth was dripping bloody foam.

"Mercy!" Harry sobbed, louder.

But Bellatrix seemed to have lost herself. Her focus on Neville was deeply unsettling in its intensity, as if she was in a world that

consisted solely of herself, her victim, and the dark, seductive magic that was coursing through her.

Harry opened his mouth to scream at her again, but his plea was cut off by another voice.

"Avada Kedavra."

A brilliant, blinding green light filled the cell… and when it faded, Neville Longbottom was dead.

Harry let out a horrible sob. Neville's glassy eyes were open, aimed at the stone ceiling. They were lifeless and flat.

Bellatrix raised her wand, blinking dazedly like she'd just awoken from a dream. She looked a bit flustered as she gathered herself. When she turned to look at her master, she seemed embarrassed.

"I…I apologize, my Lord, I—"

But the Dark Lord's piercing gaze was fixed on Harry. "Leave us," he said, ignoring her apology and dismissing her.

Bellatrix blushed when she bowed, but did not question his demand. She left.

And then they were alone—Harry Potter, Lord Voldemort… and the body of Neville Longbottom.

Harry had never felt more horrible in his life. He wanted to be angry, to be furious… but he wasn't. He was flooded with guilt. Tears continued to pour from his eyes, even when he clamped them shut.

For a long time, Harry could feel the Dark Lord's analytical gaze fixated on him, but he said nothing. Just silent, eerie observation. Until—

"Consider this *my* mercy, Harry."

When Harry opened his eyes again, it was to see that Voldemort was standing before him. His gaze was that same calculating stare—cold and unwavering.

"Neville Longbottom sealed his fate when he killed Nagini. He was already damned. I was therefore merciful in using his life to teach you the lesson of what insulting Lord Voldemort will result in… but I could have brought others."

He bent down, their eyes now level, and Harry's broken heart leapt into his throat. "A few of your little friends may have escaped, but they cannot run forever… Hermione Granger, Ronald Weasley… I will find them. And in the meantime, there is nothing stopping me from taking whomever I please. How many people would you have die for you, Harry? Luna Lovegood, Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnegan… *Ginevra Weasley*…"

Harry felt a rush of nausea when Voldemort's eyes flashed knowingly at Ginny's name.

"No," Harry barely managed to gasp. "P-please no."

Voldemort was silent for a moment. Then, in a motion that was so fast that Harry hardly saw him move, the Dark Lord lunged forward, his white hands on the shackles at Harry's wrists and his face unnervingly close.

Harry froze. Voldemort moved so that his face was right beside Harry's, his strangely cold, thin lips brushing against the shell of Harry's ear when he whispered:

"Do I need chains to hold you, Harry Potter?"

Harry shivered violently. He wasn't sure how he found it in himself to answer through the overwhelming fear.

"No."

The shackles broke open under Voldemort's hands. He rose fluidly to his feet, smirking as Harry's arms dropped to his sides. His wrists were coated in a layer of dry and crusty blood.

"No," he agreed lightly. "I do not."

Harry pulled his numb, shaking hands to his chest. They both looked at the dead form of Neville at the same time.

"Should I leave you with the body?" Voldemort asked conversationally. "Do you need to live with the proof of what it is you have done?"

Harry shook his head and closed his eyes. "Please don't," he whispered.

Harry hated himself. He hated himself, he hated himself, he hated himself.

Voldemort took a long time in responding. Harry didn't dare look at him. Eventually, there was a vibration in the air, the sensation of wordless magic. When Harry opened his eyes again, Neville was gone.

"Never again, Harry."

Then Voldemort left. The gate slammed shut behind him, and the light from the sconce went out.

Harry's tears continued to fall long after Voldemort's departure. He rubbed his raw, aching wrists, thinking only that he deserved the pain. He deserved it and more, so much more. Neville was dead, because of him… because… because he had told him…

It was only then, in the endless sea of his guilt and misery, that Harry fully realized it. He, Harry James Potter… was the only tie to immortality that the Dark Lord had left.

Precious

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At some point, despite everything, Harry's exhaustion overwhelmed him and he fell into an uneasy slumber.

His dreams were vivid. He imagined he was running through a field of tall grass on bare feet. The mud between his toes felt soft and real.

Thunder sounded from a crimson sky, and it began to rain.

"…Harry Potter…"

A silky voice sounded from somewhere behind him. It was smooth and high, and somehow, he knew at once that it was parseltongue.

"…Harry Potter…"

He ran.

Harry sprinted through the field, the grass grazing against his legs like fingernails clawing at his skin. The serpentine entity followed him. Though he saw nothing, he could feel its presence all around him, on one side, and then the other. It was the monster in the shadows, the basilisk in the pipes—

"…Harry Potter…"

He tripped and fell—it was going to be upon him any moment, he was doomed—

"Wake up!"

Harry's eyes flew open.

He nearly screamed as Narcissa moved to avoid his flailing arms. She had returned, entering his cell and lighting the sconce without him being aware.

There was the briefest beat of relief when he woke as he realized that no—he was not being hunted by snakes in a field of grass under a blood red sky—but the moment of reprieve deteriorated almost immediately. No… he was *here,* in a dungeon under Malfoy Manor,

being held captive by Lord Voldemort… and… and—

Narcissa watched him carefully. "I won't hurt you. Come here, child."

Harry hesitated, but he realized that no good would come from ignoring her requests, even if he didn't trust her. She was sharp-minded and able-bodied… and she had a wand.

Harry had nothing.

He moved closer to her as she'd asked. Narcissa smiled encouragingly.

"Good. Here, let me see your arms. Hold them out for me."

Harry did as he was told. She examined them briefly before casting a spell over them. His bloody, sore wrists felt momentarily warm—a wonderful sensation after being in such a frigid cell for so long—and when the heat vanished, the skin was soft and new. Harry ran his fingers over his healed wrists appreciatively.

"Stay still, and I'll clean the blood and dirt from your robes…"

Narcissa's voice was calming and gentle. Harry nodded before closing his eyes, letting her perform whatever spells she deemed necessary. He felt the strange, reverberating sensation all around him as she magically cleansed his clothes and skin from the many layers of filth he'd managed to accumulate since the Battle of Hogwarts.

"There," she finally said, and Harry opened his eyes. "That's better, isn't it?"

She was forcing herself to smile at him, Harry could tell. He nodded. Though he knew that a 'thank you' was probably warranted, Harry had no voice with which to speak. His throat felt raw from the crying and shouting, and he was sure his eyes were bloodshot from all of the tears he had shed earlier.

Narcissa looked away when she realized he was not going to respond. "More water," she said, conjuring up another goblet and filling it. "You will need it. Drink, please."

Harry knew she was pleading because this time, despite how badly his body craved sustenance, his mind was numb and unresponsive. He did not want to drink. Not now, not ever again.

"Please," she whispered beseechingly. "You must… You m-must drink

and be well, child…"

Then the understanding washed over him.

Making sure you are well is a task that was given to me…

If he, Harry, was not well… than Narcissa would take the punishment for it.

Feeling hollow, Harry reached for the goblet. Narcissa's face broke out into another pained smile as he took it.

The cool water had just touched his lips when the world exploded in pain.

Harry screamed in agony, and his first thought was death, this must be death—his scar was on fire with a piercing, horrific pain, as if his skull might just split open from the inside out—

The goblet went flying across the room and Harry's hands were on his face. Narcissa reached for him in a panic, frantically asking what was wrong, what happened—Harry wanted to tell her to move, to run, for this kind of pain could only mean the devastating fury of—

Lord Voldemort arrived with a calamitous *bang* as the cell gate was nearly unhinged. His aura of fury was suffocating, and Narcissa, screaming, was wandlessly and wordlessly flung across the cell and went sprawling to the other side. In a sweeping motion that was utterly inhuman, the Dark Lord reached down with one hand and grabbed Harry by the neck, effortlessly lifting him up and slamming him against the wall.

Harry could barely breathe through the pain of those cold, white fingers which were now wrapped tightly around his throat. Voldemort held him pinned to the stone wall so that his feet barely touched the ground, and he did it as easily as though Harry weighed nothing more than a rag doll. Harry gasped as narrowed, crimson eyes seared into his, emitting a hot-blooded hatred—

He didn't even have a second to defend himself. He wouldn't have been able to, even if he had tried.

Lord Voldemort scoured Harry's mind like a ravenous python, sinking his teeth in and tearing his thoughts apart, and there was no hope of escaping his wrath, none at all—Harry's memories came flying forward, lightning flashes of his past—

…Harry was in a tent, fearful and anxious… and there, at his side, was Hermione… she was crying and Ron was *gone* and he *wasn't* coming back and Harry *needed* to escape the claustrophobia of their pitiful, sorry excuse for shelter in the woods…

He was alone when he saw the doe.

Shimmering and beautiful, the silver doe led him to the frozen lake…

Harry watched in a horrified trance as the top layer of ice cracked beneath his spell. Fumbling and nervous, he stripped off layers of clothing before boldly diving in, and through sheer force of will was able to reclaim the sword of Gryffindor… But he only managed to escape with his life from the frigid pool because of the aid of his wayward friend; it was *Ron*, Ron had come back…

Ronald Weasley pulled him up from the pond, and the moment he hit solid ground he coughed up lungfuls of liquid, hacking out water while his long-lost ally thumped his back and reached forcefully for—

For the cause of his near-demise, of his burning agony—the locket—

It happened in an even more dizzying blur the second time around. The locket fell open at Harry's command, and before he knew it, Ron was swinging the sword in a crazed and frenzied motion—

The memory deteriorated, and the next thing Harry knew, they were at Hogwarts…

The very recent incident in which he, Harry, had braved the Room of Requirement in order to find the diadem…

Lord Voldemort watched in a maddening fury as Harry located the lost artifact, dodged Fiendfyre, and then, at the very last possible moment, had decided to save the life of Draco Malfoy…

He caught the diadem on the way out of the Room, but too late—the enchanted fire had already affected it too much, and before they had even touched the ground it was weeping unnatural, obsidian tears…

There was a snarl of fury from the real world which caused Harry to come to his senses. He clamped his eyes shut and tried for all he was worth to think of nothing, but such a task was impossible. Unnatural winds tore through the cell, and Narcissa cried out in fear. Voldemort's grip around Harry's throat tightened when he hissed:

"Show me, or I will kill them all."

Harry did not want or need to know who was meant by that statement. Utterly terrified, he opened his eyes… and Lord Voldemort saw.

The diadem, gone.

The cup, which used to lay in the Lestrange Vault at Gringotts… gone.

The ring, gone.

The diary, the locket, Nagini…all gone.

Only—

The Dark Lord's screech of fury was deafening. Harry was flung forcefully to the ground, the back of his skull colliding violently with the stone floor, and for the briefest moment the world went black. Voldemort's powerful, magical aura saturated the air, causing his robes to billow and the light to flicker and Harry could only imagine that both he and Narcissa were screaming, but he could not hear anything over the loud buzzing that had begun to sound in his ears the moment his head had hit the concrete.

The winds abruptly stopped. The light ceased in its ominous flickering, and the room was still and silent but for the the high-pitched note in Harry's ears that continued to ring.

Harry's mind was in a haze, clouded by fear and the light-headedness from being so brutally assaulted. Everything around him was blurred, and he vaguely registered that his glasses must have been flung from his face when he had been thrown.

Voldemort said something. His tone was ice-cold and deadly, but Harry couldn't make out the words. Then the Dark Lord left.

Harry blinked owlishly as his distorted form retreated into the shadows. He barely felt the hands on his shoulders as Narcissa propped him up.

Magic washed over him, and his mind became lucid once more. The ringing in his ears ceased. He was shaking. Harry's body was quivering from the after-effects of his mind being torn asunder… but not nearly as badly as Narcissa Malfoy was. She hardly managed to put his glasses back on his face, her fingers were trembling so terribly. Harry

adjusted them. His scar, he noted numbly… It was no longer searing in a sharp, intense pain, but aching in a dull throb…

Something wet dripped onto his eyelashes. Harry touched his forehead, and when he pulled his hand away, his fingertips were coated in blood.

Narcissa was staring at him in horror. "Your… your scar… H-here…"

She pointed a shaking wand to his forehead, but nothing happened. Her face contorted in confusion before she tried again.

Nothing. The blood continued to drip onto Harry's nose and glasses. She settled for conjuring up a white piece of fabric. "H-hold this there. Press firmly," she whispered. Harry obeyed, first wiping the blood from his face.

Narcissa continued to stare at him, clearly in a state of shock at what had just transpired. Harry wondered how many times she had seen the Dark Lord in such a fury. Had she ever? Had Narcissa Malfoy been present when Lord Voldemort, newly resurrected, had discovered that her husband had lost the diary, or when he had realized with certainty that his first horcrux was damaged beyond magical repair?

Just like the others were. Harry wondered what would have happened to him just now, were he not a horcrux himself.

The only one.

"What… what did he s-see, child?"

Narcissa's voice shook when she spoke. Harry knew she asked only because of her concern for her family, to know if the Dark Lord had seen anything that would cause him to be angry with her, Draco, or Lucius… and while Voldemort had seen the moment where Harry had saved Draco's life, he did not think that the Dark Lord would be angry towards Draco for what happened in the Room of Requirement. He had been fighting Harry, after all, and Draco did not even know his horcruxes existed in the first place…

Neither did Narcissa. And Harry knew he could never tell her, or it would mean her death.

Harry shook his head solemnly. "…I… Nothing to endanger you," he said.

Narcissa assessed him carefully, looking very much like she did not believe him and was considering asking again, but eventually she nodded. She was still shaking like a leaf.

Narcissa retrieved the goblet, refilled it with water, and offered it to him. Harry held it with both of his trembling hands. Very slowly, he took small, tentative sips. It took all of his concentration to not spill it all over himself.

There was a long stretch of silence while he drank. Narcissa was staring blankly into the lit sconce on the wall.

Finally, once the goblet was empty, Harry broke the silence.

"What did he say?"

Narcissa's vacant eyes fell to him. "What?"

"Before he left, he s-said something, but I couldn't hear it over the ringing in my ears… What did he say?"

She swallowed thickly. Her gaze shifted back to the light on the wall.

"Heal him," she said quietly, repeating the Dark Lord's parting words. Her voice carried none of the icy hatred that Voldemort's had; her tone was flat and empty.

"His life is… so precious.'"

Chapter End Notes

fanart by arctutus-night-star

Warmth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Time felt warped and skewed.

The windowless cell was perpetually dark, save for the few times when Narcissa appeared, and were it not for her Harry would have had no idea how long he'd been there.

The last time she'd entered, she'd told him that it had been nearly two days.

Two days, and no news of Hermione or Ron.

Two days, and Voldemort had not returned.

Harry had little else to do in his prison other than speculate wildly on where his friends were hiding, how they were faring… and what the Dark Lord made of the revelation that he, Harry James Potter, was his very last means of eternal life.

Obviously, he was enraged—Voldemort had, after all, never intended to make his prophesized enemy a horcrux in the first place. If things had worked out differently, Harry thought, perhaps, maybe, after that initial anger had dwindled, the Dark Lord might have settled into being accepting of that fact. After all, what harm was one more tie to immortal life, intentional or otherwise?

The harm was, of course, in that Harry was not an inanimate diary or locket or chalice, but a very cognizant, aware, independent human being with a entire soul of his own. An individual who happened to be an acute victim of the Dark Lord's merciless regime; an orphan subjected to a horrible childhood who never even knew what he was until he inevitably received a letter from Hogwarts, all because Voldemort had murdered his parents and tried to murder him upon hearing an ominous prophecy. One which only became significant in the end because he, Lord Voldemort, secretly terrified at the prospect of a potential, worthy adversary, had acted and therefore given it meaning himself.

Harry would have been a normal boy were it not for the neurotic tendencies of an unstable Dark Lord. The prophecy concerning a child

being born as the seventh month dies would have just been one of a thousand meaningless, glass spheres in the Department of Mysteries if Voldemort had only brushed the young Severus Snape's words aside.

But that wasn't what happened.

Instead, the unhinged mass murderer had taken what he'd heard of Trelawney's proclamation very seriously indeed, and had consequently and inadvertently fractured his already shredded soul… leaving behind a fragment which latched on to the only living being left in that broken home.

Harry was the only horcrux left, and he was the only one which Voldemort had not carefully planned for. And then, to find out that it was he, Harry Potter, his self-made, prophesized enemy and Dumbledore's man, through and through, who also happened to be his soul carrier… to discover that it had been *he* who had been destroying the other horcruxes himself?

Harry could only imagine what kind of internal turmoil this stirred in the old, dangerously powerful dark wizard, to not be able to kill the one person he surely wanted to murder above all others.

…Perhaps, Harry mused morbidly, if he had figured it out sooner… Voldemort might have tried a bit harder to sway Harry to his side when they had first met. When he was eleven, young and vulnerable in front of the Mirror of Erised.

We could bring them back, Harry… Together…

…But such long-ago recollections hardly mattered. Harry was here now, and he had no idea how the Dark Lord was going to handle this current, tragic state of affairs.

For his caretaker's part, the encounter with the Dark Lord had shaken Narcissa Malfoy very, very badly.

While she was still kind towards Harry, she never lingered long. More than likely, she was afraid that Lord Voldemort may appear at any moment, lethally incensed for any number of reasons towards Harry Potter and wholly uncaring as to whether or not Narcissa happened to be present. The Dark Lord was an inferno in his fury, and he destroyed everyone and everything in his path without concern.

Harry could not blame her for not staying long.

He was beginning to wonder if Voldemort would ever return at all, or if he planned to keep Harry here indefinitely, alone but alive and well. Physically well. A task which poor Narcissa Malfoy had the burden of shouldering.

She brought him water and bread. Nauseated, Harry only managed to find it in himself to eat because he knew that if he did not, the blame for his refusal would fall on her. But Narcissa was gentle and sympathetic, even going so far as to create a small addition to the cell that served as a tiny washroom of sorts. It wasn't closed off, but it was far better than the alternative which Harry had been envisioning—some kind of degrading bucket in the corner or something. He supposed she couldn't afford him any real comforts, because if she did, it could invoke the unintentional wrath of the Dark Lord.

She had a family to think of. Again, Harry could not blame her.

Harry's world was a repetitious sea of fear, shame, and suspense. And while he was horribly exhausted in every conceivable way, the continual stream of adrenaline coursing through his veins made sleep a nearly impossible task—not to mention the permanent chill in the air. Harry found that he was constantly cold, no matter how he huddled into himself and shivered.

Rarely, despite this, despite everything, he would sometimes begin to nod off, only to awaken with a start moments later, thinking that he heard someone approaching the cell in the darkness. But it was only ever his imagination, and Narcissa was always proceeded by the soft light from her wand, anyway.

Harry had just been in one of his semi-conscious phases when that familiar glow caused him to jump.

It startled him more than usual this time, because she had just been there moments before to bring him water. Panic gripped him from the inside. He could only assume that the reason for such a swift return would mean something sinister—but he was even more shocked to see that, as she approached the iron gates, she was smiling, looking genuinely happy. Harry was instantly drawn to what she held in her hands, and, amazingly, he found himself smiling, too.

A blanket.

She entered the cell. In her arms was a thin, ratty looking sheet and a pillow that was stained and old. Harry hardly cared about the state of them, though; he was used to far worse beddings from when he'd lived

with the Dursley's under the cupboard—yet when Narcissa handed them over, his grin broadened significantly.

They may have looked shabby, but they felt impossibly thick and so very warm. She had enchanted them to look old and worn like that, she must have, because the material beneath his fingers was luxuriously soft, like nothing he'd ever felt before in his life, and they radiated an impossible, magical heat. He looked at her, beaming, and it truly, physically hurt his face to smile so widely, it had been so long.

Harry opened his mouth to thank her, but she quickly put a finger to his lips to silence him. Instead, she smirked knowingly, and gave him a quick wink as she stepped away.

Our little secret, she said, without saying anything at all.

Harry was still grinning stupidly after she left. For some strange, undecipherable reason, the warmth of the enchanted fabric in his arms filled him with a sense of something almost like hope. He knew it was completely unreasonable—he was Lord Voldemort's captive and his last horcrux, he was defenseless in a cell under Malfoy Manor, and he was damned, utterly damned... but as he swathed himself in the illusory blanket and curled into the fetal position in the corner on the floor, his head resting on the cushy pillow which emitted the same heat, the magic warmed more than his body, and he blessedly fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

When he first awoke, in was in a state of pure, blissful ignorance. Perhaps waking up to total blackness added to this, because for a moment he questioned where he was, how he had gotten there, why was the tent so dark, and where were Ron and Hermione…?

It was a short-lived reprieve. The first thing that brought him crashing back to reality was the simple, instinctual act of reaching for his glasses—from a bedside table which was not there, as he had never taken them off in the first place, because he was on a stone floor, in a cell, at Malfoy Manor—

The dreadful realizations smashed together in his mind as his eyes flew open, and if he hadn't already been on the brink of a full-blown panic attack, he certainly was at the sight that greeted him.

Everything was in darkness…except for the narrowed, blood-red gaze that was silently, piercingly fixated on him from the other side of the

cell.

Harry would have screamed at the unexpected presence of Lord Voldemort just feet away upon awakening, but his heart seemed to physically lurch upwards and lodge itself in his throat, cutting off any and all sound that may have escaped his lips. He clutched the blanket tightly to his chest and recoiled.

His eyes adjusted slightly to the darkness. Lord Voldemort did not react. He did not even blink at Harry's sudden retreat against the wall, only continued to stare at him through menacing slits of vivid crimson.

How long had he been standing in the shadows like that, watching him sleep?

Now that Harry was painfully mindful of the Dark Lord being there, it seemed insane that he could ever *not* be aware of his presence, asleep or otherwise. Voldemort's energy was heavy and dark; a dense, intoxicating aura that made the very air feel as though it had weight to it.

Harry's labored breathing was fast and loud. The sound of it echoed ominously in the cell, like the entire stone enclosure was sentient.

Voldemort still did not react.

This went on for an unprecedented amount of time. Harry could do nothing but sit there, attempting to breathe properly while he waited for the Dark Lord to finally reveal whatever reason it was he had for returning.

"…Harry Potter."

There was no suppressing the shiver that shot up Harry's spine. He bit his lip to stop from making some kind of horrible, pathetic sound. Voldemort blinked once. He tilted his head to one side, a curious gleam shining in the depths of his scarlet gaze.

Inquisitive, thoughtful.

"…My human horcrux."

Angry.

A different brand of hatred emanated from the imposing figure of Lord

Voldemort tonight. It was not the wild, untamable fury of a cyclone as it had been days before, when he had scoured Harry's mind and seen the way in which his horcruxes had been destroyed. No, the Dark Lord had composed himself… but the vast amount of animosity, cold and controlled as it now was, had not waned even slightly.

Those scarlet slits for eyes singularly harbored *loathing* as they stared down at him.

Lord Voldemort slowly advanced with the smooth, inhuman grace of a serpent. Harry would have retracted further away were his back not already flush against the stone wall.

Then, in a rapid, fluid motion, the Dark Lord's narrowed eyes were level with his own, those irises bleeding with a hue that sang of bloodshed.

"Do you remember this, Harry?"

His scar exploded in pain.

A ripple of white-hot agony burst across his forehead. Harry screamed at the sensation; it was horrible, it was too much, he could not bear it, he could not—

It ceased. Only seconds later the suffering ended, and it had dissipated so quickly and entirely that Harry felt he might have imagined the intensity of it in the first place.

But the coy, sinister smirk that formed on Voldemort's lips indicated otherwise.

There was another long moment of silence before he spoke again. "I asked you a question," Voldemort murmured. He leaned in closer, and Harry inhaled the familiar scent of blood and ice on his breath. "Do you remember that pain…?"

Harry couldn't find it in himself to speak, so he settled for nodding. He touched his forehead. Harry was at least relieved to find that his scar was not bleeding again.

It hadn't stopped weeping blood for hours, the last time he had felt Lord Voldemort's wrath.

The Dark Lord's grin became more twisted. "Good," he all but crooned, having watched the way Harry's fingers grazed his own scar

inquisitively. "You do not *enjoy* that pain, do you, Harry…?"

Voldemort's intense gaze suddenly became softer, his expression less menacing. His red eyes stared unwaveringly into Harry's, uncharacteristically gentle in their steadfastness. Harry was so stunned by this atypical demeanor that he hardly knew how to react. He was barely able to shake his head 'no', and even when he did, it felt foreign and wrong.

Voldemort smiled.

Harry had a deep sense of foreboding.

An even more warped, demented grin stretched across the Dark Lord's lips. "I did not think so, no…" Voldemort moved his face closer to Harry's in the darkness. "You prefer *pleasure* over pain, just like every man… Don't you, Harry…?"

He raised his pale, phantom-like hand. Voldemort hesitated, letting it hover over Harry's scar and inhaling audibly like he, too, was filled with exhilaration about what was about to transpire.

"Don't you…?"

The Dark Lord ghosted his fingertips over Harry's forehead, and the moment their skin met, everything shifted and fell apart.

A burst of weightless, beautiful warmth that had nothing to do with the enchanted fabric draped over his legs exploded in Harry's mind. It was the antithesis of the pain he usually experienced, the complete opposite of the suffering—instead, he was filled with a lovely, almost dizzying buoyancy which radiated from where Voldemort's fingers brushed over his face, and he found himself leaning into his hand, clinging to this impossible, alluring sensation—

Harry's mind twisted in an unfathomable way. He was himself and he was not, he was a man and he was the snake, that same, serpentine creature which was coiled so intimately around him that he did not know where he ended and it began, and for a fleeting, transient moment Harry saw himself through eyes that were his and yet were not his, vision that was inexplicably clear despite the obscurity of the darkness surrounding them; he saw a raven-haired boy with parted lips and eyes fluttering close at his touch, and he could feel his own fractured self in this unfortunate child, deep within the boy's own, unmarred, virgin soul, and he could feel that, too—the overwhelming, all-encompassing sensation of being pure and whole and he wanted

more—he leaned forward so that their foreheads were nearly touching, and the powerful feeling of blissful weightlessness escalated—the boy sucked in a sharp breath—

Everything stopped.

The Dark Lord retracted his hand as though Harry's skin had burned him, and the beautiful sensation of light and warmth vanished. Voldemort stood, backing away and receding to the far side of the cell.

He stared down at Harry in a way that was nothing at all like how he had been glaring before. His scarlet eyes were wide in shock, and, it was difficult to tell in the darkness for certain, but Harry thought that he almost looked… afraid.

Obviously, whatever the Dark Lord had done just now, whatever it was he'd anticipated… he had not expected *that*. To be flooded with such an indescribable weightlessness, to be swept up in such a powerful rush of light…

Voldemort continued to stare down at him, a plethora of contradictory emotions twisting his pale features in a way that looked very out of place on the Dark Lord.

"…What was that?"

Harry surprised even himself at his question.

Voldemort's expression slid into a glower. The sound of Harry's voice had, apparently, reminded him of just who it was he was towering over. Harry felt a spark of annoyance when he didn't say anything, only glared furiously in the silence.

"What did you just do?" Harry tried again.

For a moment, it looked as though Voldemort might respond, a strange flicker of something like consideration cutting across his scowl—but then, without a word, he soundlessly swept from the cell, disappearing into the shadows and leaving Harry with no explanation whatsoever. The gate swung shut behind him, and Harry was once more alone.

He stared vacantly into the darkness where Voldemort had vanished. His mind was racing, reeling over what had just happened, trying to make sense of it all. It had only lasted a few seconds, that

extraordinary, powerful feeling that had consumed him when Voldemort touched his face… but the strangest sensation of all had not been the—and he hated to even think it, considering who he was referring to—*pleasure*, but the outlandish experience of having seen the world, however briefly, through Lord Voldemort's eyes…

It sounded ludicrous, to come to the conclusion that he eventually did. Harry continued to stare into nothingness, and though he knew he was entirely alone, now, in his cold, iron cage, he found the words leaving his lips anyway, answering his own question like he was whispering a secret to the shadows.

"…You were *feeling my soul*…"

Chapter End Notes

Fanart by grimbramwell

Pitiful Creatures

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry was beginning to wonder if he would ever see daylight again.

Voldemort had left him hours ago, alone and confused in the darkness. He had no idea what to make of the strange incident, but he was certain it had not been what Voldemort had thought would happen. Which begged the question: What *had* the Dark Lord been hoping for when he breached the connection of their souls, aware, for the first time while doing so, that Harry was a horcrux?

…Dumbledore… The headmaster had once said something to him about why it was he thought that Nagini was a horcrux… Something about Voldemort having a substantial amount of control over her, even for a parselmouth…

Was that what Voldemort had been hoping to do? Control him?

Harry shivered, gathering the blanket around him. Well, if that was what he'd been going for, he'd failed miserably. Harry had felt Voldemort's rush of vicious emotions right alongside his own, his shock and astonishment at the unexpected weightlessness and his overwhelming—

Harry shuddered again. He couldn't even think it without feeling sick. His own face, too, had been a highly disturbing sight. He'd felt that pull towards Voldemort's touch like a magnet—a primal need to feel, to connect with the monstrosity of a man in front of him…

Harry nearly blanched. The horcrux. It was just the horcrux. It was the fraction of the Dark Lord's soul that was currently stuck in him, and… and he would figure out a way to get rid of it.

He had to. He *had* to.

Harry rubbed his temples, weary. How had it gotten to this point? He, Harry, a captive… Neville, tortured and murdered right in front of him… Hermione and Ron, on the run…

And how long could they possibly stay hidden? Harry bit his lip as he contemplated where they might be. Perhaps they had returned to

Grimmauld Place…? But no, that would be stupid, seeing as a Death Eater had gained access to it accidentally, when they'd apparated back…

What Harry wouldn't give to be back at Grimmauld Place. It had seemed miserable at the time, but now, in hindsight, the entire experience felt like it had been a long holiday. Ron and Hermione at his sides, a roof over their heads… comfortable beds and warm, delicious meals… at least, once Kreacher had started to—

Harry gasped. *Kreacher!*

Wasn't that exactly how they had escaped from this cell last time? Only it had been Dobby who had come to their rescue… Harry's heart ached at the thought of the poor, fallen creature who had sacrificed himself for them, but he forced such painful recollections away. *Kreacher.* Kreacher was still alive, and he, Harry, was still technically his master… If Harry could get him to appear, he could find Hermione and Ron before they did something stupid, before they were inevitably tracked down…

Do I need chains to hold you, Harry Potter…?

The recollection of Voldemort's threat in his ear made Harry hesitate, but he couldn't simply not try. If he didn't escape, then there was no hope for ending the war… and no one would be safe, ever again.

Harry swallowed hard. If he summoned Kreacher now, would the old elf appear? Had the Malfoys—or the Dark Lord himself—put any extra wards in place in order to prevent such a thing from happening again?

Probably, Harry thought. But there was only one way to find out. He cleared his throat before calling into the dark.

"…Kreacher?"

A heartbeat. Then—

Crack.

The sound like a gunshot nearly gave Harry a heart attack when it shattered the long silence in the cell.

"…M-master Potter…?"

Harry could barely make him out in the darkness, the elf's tiny frame

visible only by his giant, reflective eyes. He didn't seem to be able to see in the dreary cell any better than Harry—Kreacher was turned the wrong way, looking, confused—

"Kreacher!" Harry hissed, and the elf turned. Harry's body was trembling, adrenaline coursing through his veins. He jumped up at once, tossing the charmed blanket aside. "We need to leave, we need to—"

Someone screamed.

A horrid, blood-curdling screech tore through the air. High-pitched and horrific, it echoed in the stagnant cell like a choir of suffering, bouncing off the stone walls and shaking Harry's very bones. Before Harry could so much as draw breath, something cold and hard was wrapping around his waist, yanking him backwards—

The chains—the chains hanging from the wall, which Voldemort had released him from—had sprung to life, literally. They were glowing now, a bright, furious red, and were bathing the entire cell in a vivid crimson. They coiled and wrapped around his body, and Harry saw, with a wave of horror, that they were no longer chains at all, but—but *serpents*; they had turned into writhing, hissing snakes—they pinned his arms to his sides, made it impossible to stay on his feet—

There was a blinding flash and a slashing curse that cut across the room at the same time that Harry toppled and fell. He squeezed his eyes shut as he braced for the impact of his head hitting the stones, and when it did, Harry's world flashed white. When his eyes fluttered open again, he saw Kreacher…

Or Kreacher's head, at least.

The elf's body was clear on the other side of the cell. There was a violent splash of scarlet splattered across the wall, and the blood continued to spout from his neck. Kreacher's eyes were wide and vacant. The glowing serpents that had once been chains danced in their reflection.

The screaming stopped.

There was a beat of silence in which Harry could do nothing but stare into the dead eyes of his house-elf. Then his scar exploded in pain.

Voldemort appeared in a flash of pure, undiluted wrath. It was even worse than the last time he had done so—the cell gate nearly

shattered apart, winds like a cyclone whipped across his skin—and Voldemort, bathed in the light of the glowing, scarlet snakes which coiled themselves around Harry's body, was a more terrifying sight than ever before.

The Dark Lord's eyes were blazing, but his face was cold and undecipherable. He looked down at Harry from the entrance of the cell with a flat expression.

The winds stopped. The pain in his scar stopped.

The entire world seemed to come to a standstill for a moment as Voldemort stared down at his horrified human horcrux. Harry's panic was so strong he could not breathe.

Voldemort lifted a hand, and with one long, spidery finger, beckoned to him—a seemingly mocking 'come hither' motion, and the snakes which held Harry pulled him to his feet and dragged him across the floor until he was directly in front of the Dark Lord, face to face.

Voldemort stared at him, silent. Harry's heart was lodged somewhere in his throat, making him all too aware of its thundering pulse.

"Oh, Harry…"

The Dark Lord's whispered voice made Harry's hair stand on end. Voldemort went to touch his face, and Harry was far too paralyzed in fear to attempt to pull away. He braced himself for that horrible agony in his scar, grit his teeth, and held his breath.

Oh… *oh.*

Voldemort dragged his nails softly down Harry's cheek, and accompanying the physical contact was that strange rush of warmth, that horrible pull like a lure towards the monster.

"Do you take me for a fool, Harry Potter?" Voldemort asked, leaving his fingers under Harry's chin.

Harry couldn't possibly form words at that moment. His mind was too clouded with fear and—and that impossible, horrible yearning—

But then the warmth vanished and he was screaming, the weightless buoyancy instantly replaced by the far more familiar sensation of white-hot pain in his scar. Voldemort's hand was in his hair, fingers curled around his unruly locks and pulling, hard, yanking his head

back and sending waves of anguish shooting down his spine—

It was then that Voldemort's eerie composure cracked, contorting in rage. His inhuman features twisted into something ruthless and fierce, and when he seethed it was so that his lips were hovering an inch from Harry's face, and Harry could smell blood and ice and—

"Do you take me for a fool, Harry Potter? Did you think I would not be aware of any living entity that were to enter this cell? Did you think I would ever overlook such details *ever again?"*

Harry's heart was beating so rapidly he was sure it must soon fail. Voldemort stared into his eyes with a debilitating rage, and it took Harry a moment to realize that the Dark Lord expected him to answer his questions. He couldn't.

Voldemort's incensed expression melted away into something less hostile, and, to Harry's great surprise… he smiled. That same, demonic grin. It was somehow even more frightening.

He tilted his head so that his lips were next to Harry's ear, his voice dangerously soft. "Make no mistake, Harry Potter. You will never escape. You. Are. *Mine."*

Harry had barely registered that he'd hissed the words in parseltongue before he was flung to the floor. His back hit the stones with a painful thud, and he inhaled sharply, rolling to his side at the Dark Lord's feet.

Then the snakes began to burn.

They glowed a brighter, more vibrant red, and suddenly it was as if they were made of iron which had been sitting for days in a roaring flame. They scorched straight through his robes, incinerating the fabric and searing into his skin, dragging their coiling bodies along his torso and back, arms and legs with white-hot, fiery scales—Harry screamed in torment as they moved, hissing softly as they went, and he then realized what it was they were chorusing, over and over…

"…Hold him… Hold him… Hold him…"

Harry tried to thrash against them, but it was useless. The more he moved, the tighter they wrapped around his body and the hotter they became. Struggling made everything worse, so much worse, and he soon stopped—only laid there, shaking and trying to stop from screaming out in pain.

Voldemort's eyes flashed vindictively when Harry stopped moving.

"…I have… a few small tasks to see to, Harry," he said, glancing at the decapitated head of Kreacher. "But do not fret. I will be back shortly, and then we are going to go on a brief field trip. I have a meeting planned, and now, most unfortunately, your presence is required."

He gave Harry one last, demented smile before turning and taking his leave. Alarmed by this ominous statement, Harry fought against the constraints again, but it was no use—they would only glow brighter at his struggling, licking like living flames against him. Harry let out a pathetic cry as his robes started to turn to ash on his body, burnt fabric against his skin which melted onto the floor.

Voldemort paused in the entryway. He didn't turn around at the howl of pain, but Harry was certain that he was grinning maliciously.

"Resistance will only bring you pain, Harry… You cannot win."

He let out a low, soft laugh. Harry's breath hitched at the sound.

"You belong to Lord Voldemort now."

The Dark Lord disappeared. The cell door swung shut, and Harry was left curled on the floor, doing his best to not move and cause his serpentine bindings to harm him even more. Fear riddled his mind as he stared at the severed head of Kreacher, which was still there, his empty gaze filling him with grief. Two pitiful creatures—one cold and unmoving, one burning and alive…

A meeting. He had said… he had said that his presence was required…

Harry jumped when he came to the unwanted conclusion, earning another ripple of heat and pain from the cursed snakes. His robes were quickly turning to dust.

"…Hold him… Hold him… Hold him…"

A meeting.

"…Hold him… Hold him… Hold him…"

A Death Eater meeting.

"…Hold him… Hold him… Hold him…"

Harry thought that he would rather never see daylight again.

Chapter End Notes

fanart by Grimbramwell

The Monster You See

It felt like a lifetime in which Harry laid there on the floor of the cell, Kreacher's severed head on one side of him and his decapitated body on the other. For such a small being, there was a devastating amount of blood. It pooled on the stones, puddles that oozed towards him in his serpentine bindings.

Harry tried to inch further away several times, but every movement resulted in more pain, more blistering agony against his skin. The snakes would flash a brighter red, and the heightened heat wouldn't lessen until he stilled.

'*Hold him… Hold him… Hold him…*'

They continued to chorus the words in a low hiss. Harry tried to discern just how many of them there were—four? Five? It was difficult to tell, as they continually slithered around his body. They slid across his waist and shoulders, between his legs, up his back. His robes had been reduced to nothing but ashes in mere minutes, leaving him naked save for a layer of dust.

'*Hold him… Hold him… Hold him…*'

His skin, though… His skin, Harry noticed with a wave of nausea, was —it *was* being burnt, he could feel it, it was *horrible*—but they were not actually harming him at all. Everywhere the snakes touched him with their fiery scales was scalding pain—but just for a moment. His blisters would heal over almost at once, leaving trails of pristine, baby-soft skin in their place. Harry's whole body was crisscrossed in tender, pink lines.

'*Hold him… Hold him… Hold him…*'

He felt sick at the message that Voldemort was conveying through this monstrous act of torture:

I can burn you alive, Harry Potter… without burning you at all.

Harry shuddered.

It only made the pain worse.

When Voldemort did finally return, it was unnervingly silent.

Harry had been keeping his eyes closed the majority of the time he lay there, simply trying not to move, despite the fact that he was stuck in the middle of what was now a cold puddle of blood. Though the snakes did burn much less fiercely when he was still, they never stopped hurting him entirely. Harry had therefore begun the exercise of closing his eyes, focusing on his breathing, and…

Empty your mind.

He had never been very good at Occlumency, that was true enough, but Harry had come to the harsh conclusion in the past twenty-four hours that shielding his thoughts was a skill he simply *must* learn.

And if focusing on this, if practicing could help distract him from the pain, from the parseltongue mantra in his ears…

'*Hold him… Hold him… Hold—'*

Empty your mind.

A deep breath in, a deep breath out…

Think of nothing… Think of no one…

Harry's eyes fluttered open, and it was easy, for a moment, to imagine that he was not in a cell bathed in cursed, crimson light, but back in his dorm room, in Gryffindor tower, and the red was just the curtains pulled round his four-post bed…

He closed his eyes again…

Empty your mind.

A deep breath in, a deep breath out…

A deep breath in, a deep breath out…

He slowly opened his eyes again, and—

Voldemort.

There, just *there*—no angry winds, no sound of the gate opening, not even footsteps—but there he was, standing ominously still in the corner where, just two minutes ago, when Harry had last looked, there had been nothing at all.

Harry jerked violently on the ground, startled out of his self-induced

meditation. The snakes around him hissed their disapproval at his action and flashed, chanting more quickly.

'*Hold him, hold him, hold him—*'

Voldemort's lips twitched. He advanced, moving towards his human horcrux with a fluidity that was reminiscent of a basilisk. For a long moment, the Dark Lord did nothing but stand there, towering over his prisoner and watching him as he gasped in pain with every tremble and twitch.

His scarlet eyes trailed over Harry's body now that it was exposed, covered in nothing but soot. It was a controlled action, methodical. First his face, then his neck, then his torso, then…

Harry was burning in more ways than one.

But the Dark Lord's expression remained resolutely blank, and when his eyes flickered back to Harry's, it was without any hint of emotion whatsoever. He lifted a single finger, much in the same way he had earlier, and beckoned for him to rise.

"*Come.*"

The second Voldemort spoke, the snakes slithered across Harry's body in different directions. One around his neck, two on each of his wrists, two on his ankles, and one around his waist.

Six. There were six of them.

They gathered at these places and then pulled him up, magically forcing him to stand and face the Dark Lord. His lips twitched again when Harry failed to suppress a yelp of shock at being wrenched to his feet.

Voldemort's fingers curled around his wrist, and it was so strange, that moment in which they touched, because the burning pain seemed to fade, and instead—

Harry's astonished thoughts were quickly derailed. Voldemort gave no warning before somehow, impossibly, within the manor walls… they disapparated.

The second they reappeared elsewhere, Harry was thrown to the floor.

To his great surprise, however, the landing was not horrific. His head

did not collide with hard brick or concrete, but he instead fell against what was an exuberantly thick carpet.

"*Stay. Be silent.*"

Harry wasn't sure if those parseltongue commands were meant for him or the serpents which ensnared him—probably both. The snakes ceased in their repetitious mantra, though they continued to coil around him. Harry rolled as slowly as he could to his side, taking in his surroundings which, for the first time in what felt like an eternity, were not stone walls and iron gates.

He was laying on the floor of what looked like a dining hall. It was a large and garish space, in the center of which was a long table with over a dozen chairs around it. A giant fireplace on one side illuminated the hall in a soft, golden hue. It was empty. Save for he and Lord Voldemort, there was no one else present. Harry wondered if they were still in Malfoy Manor, or if they had gone somewhere else entirely.

The Dark Lord turned away from his fallen charge and sat in the chair at the center of the table with his back to him. Harry could just barely make out the side of his snake-like face from where he lay.

He couldn't help it. He couldn't *not* speak.

"Wh-what are you—"

"*Silence.*"

Voldemort spat the command without turning to look down at him. The snake which had been circling Harry's neck tightened, constricting and burning into the delicate skin there in an unfathomable way. The rest of his question died in Harry's throat, replaced by a sharp breath that he was hardly able to let out through the pressure against his airway.

It only lasted a moment, but it was enough. Harry didn't speak again.

It was quiet for a long time. Voldemort merely sat at the table with his eyes closed, his hands folded in front of him as though in silent prayer.

Then the fireplace flickered green.

Harry's heart fluttered at the sudden shift in the atmosphere, at the

way in which the room had gone from scarlet to emerald. Someone had entered the space via the Floo network, but who, Harry couldn't see from the floor…

Footsteps, murmuring, more flashes of green, more muttering… People were arriving, speaking to each other in hushed voices before sitting down in what must have been a pre-arranged seating arrangement based on the way they moved. Voldemort remained motionless with his eyes shut the entire time, like some kind of unnerving, marble statue.

Slowly, they filtered in. The Death Eaters. Harry recognized a few, as they appeared here maskless and unafraid. Dolohov. Yaxley. Bellatrix Lestrange.

And they most certainly recognized him, too. Every one of them gaped in shock when they first noticed the charcoal-stained boy in the corner, the supposed Chosen One, trembling and covered in cursed serpents, stained with blood, and smelling of burnt skin.

There were two exceptions to this. The first, of course, was Bellatrix, who had just recently seen Harry Potter and was hardly surprised that her Lord had decided to humiliate him further. In fact, she looked gleeful when her eyes landed on his, and she grinned maliciously. Harry glared back at her, but it only served to make her smile widen.

The second person to react more than momentarily shocked was Draco Malfoy.

Surely the Malfoy heir had known that he was being held in the dungeon beneath his own home, of that Harry was certain. But nothing could have prepared Draco for this, the sight of his teenage nemesis reduced to a shuddering pile on the floor at Lord Voldemort's feet, covered in blood and ashes and wrapped in slithering, red serpents. He paused when they made eye contact from across the room, and even from so far away, even as the room flickered green again when more people arrived, Harry could see the color drain from Draco's face.

For Harry had *just* saved his life. Only days ago, Harry had decided to fly headfirst into the Fiendfyre after all, to go back for him, despite the fact that he, Crabbe and Goyle had been the cause of it all…

Draco froze, petrified. It wasn't until his father prodded him impatiently from behind that he moved, snapping out of his stupor and ripping his eyes away from Harry. Lucius didn't look at him.

A few moments later, and the fireplace ceased in its green flickering. The room was bathed singularly in a dull gold, all of the chairs now occupied.

The Death Eaters waited quietly for their master to speak. For a time, there was no sound other than the crackling of the flames. Harry attempted to catch Draco's eye again, to try and convey what message he wasn't even sure, but it didn't work. Though he could just make out the Malfoy heir's profile in the firelight, Draco, along with everyone else, was not looking at him. Their silent attention was fixed solely on the Dark Lord.

Finally, Voldemort opened his eyes. He lowered his hands down towards the table, his arms stretched out wide on either side of him as though in greeting.

"My most faithful followers…"

He said the words in a low and silky voice, like he was paying them all a great compliment. Bellatrix, who sat at his right-hand side, looked upon him with eyes shimmering with adoration.

"We have much to discuss tonight," Voldemort continued. He did not so much as look in Harry's direction, nor did he acknowledge him. "First and foremost, I would like to hear from you, Yaxley. I anticipate that you have made…progress?"

Yaxley, who was a few seats further away and on the opposite side of the table, stood, and even Harry could see that he was very nervous. His eyes barely met the Dark Lord's before he looked to the ground, his head already bowed in submission.

"Most unfortunately, m-my Lord, we have not yet made any discernible progress towards locating the second and third Undesirables…"

His voice trailed off feebly. Voldemort's head tilted to one side as he seemingly contemplated the cowering man before him.

"No progress," he reiterated, his tone dangerously soft. "You have made… no progress."

"Well, no, technically, we have, as we now know that—we know that they are n-not anywhere within Diagon Alley, nor are they in Godric's Hollow—"

"Did I ask where they *are not*?"

Voldemort's interruption was hardly above a whisper, but it rendered Yaxley silent at once. His face flushed with color.

"I… No, my Lord."

A short but very pertinent pause in which no one dared to breathe. Harry's mind was reeling in the silence—Ron and Hermione were still on the run, they were still okay…

"You have the Minister under your control, and therefore all of the power which the Ministry of Magic has to offer. You have access to all of the Snatchers and have even been granted permission to hire as many more as you like. You have free reign to do anything you deem necessary in order to accomplish this task… and yet you are unable to locate two delinquent *teenagers*."

Yaxley's blush deepened. He said nothing, only remained standing with his head lowered in shame.

"…I want them found. I want them brought to me alive. And I want them *soon*." The Dark Lord leaned forward, red eyes flashing. "Is this understood, Yaxley?"

"Y-yes, my Lord."

Quivering, he sat.

"Dolohov," Voldemort said, much more conversationally, as he turned his attention to the man on his left. "Your report?"

"Of course, my Lord." The portly man cleared his throat and stood. "While nearly all magical people have pledged fealty to the Ministry of Magic's new regime, we were correct in assuming that the rebellious radio show would continue. Yesterday, they aired a short broadcast in which they told listeners they did not believe Undesirable Number One to be on the run, but with Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley, wherever they may be, continuing to work on the secret orders of Albus Dumbledore… They said they did not flee out of fear, but were forced to retreat from battle in order to complete these tasks. They spoke of hope. They told their viewers that Harry Potter is still active, still a threat, and is working against you, my Lord, even now… and that this war is by no means over."

His eyes flickered to Harry, who felt his stomach drop. Lee, Fred, and

George were continuing to run *Potterwatch*, then… And they were telling everyone that he, Harry, was still out there, fighting the good fight with his friends…

"Indeed…"

The Dark Lord sounded unsurprised; in fact, he seemed amused.

It was then that he finally shifted his focus to Harry.

"*Rise,"* he hissed. The snakes slid across Harry's body to gather around his wrists, ankles, waist and neck as they had before, pulling him upright. The Death Eaters jeered when he stood, completely exposed and vulnerable before them.

Voldemort smirked, motioning him closer with a lazy gesture. *"Come."*

The bindings forced Harry forward until he was at the Dark Lord's side. Voldemort rose to his feet as well, his demented smile broadening at Harry's utter humiliation. "Tell me, my loyal followers… Does Harry Potter look very threatening to you?"

They all laughed. "What say you, Bellatrix?" Voldemort asked, looking at his deadliest lieutenant. "Has his ferocity waned since your last encounter?"

Bellatrix turned in her seat to face him fully, and Harry met her gaze with the most murderous glower he could muster. Looking completely unfazed by him, she let her eyes trailed down his naked body, painfully slow, spending an unnecessarily long time lingering on… certain areas.

Whatever rage Harry had bolstered within him quickly died, replaced with sheer embarrassment. Bellatrix grinned. "Yes, my Lord, I would agree with you… Dear Harry's *fierceness* has most certainly diminished… But other aspects are significantly improved." She paused, her gaze flickering down his torso again and making Harry's face burn hotter. "I must admit, Harry-kins, I prefer this attire much more than your old school robes."

Everyone laughed again, and a few even whistled jeeringly. Voldemort let it go on for a while, grinning crookedly as he did, but eventually he rose a hand and effectively ended their hollering.

"No," he said, "Harry Potter is no longer a threat to us or our cause… But that is not to say that he is not without his uses." Voldemort

brandished his wand, and before him appeared a tightly furled scroll. He uncurled the long stretch of paper to reveal an official-looking document, and set it on the table in front of him.

"This here is the legal paperwork detailing the ownership of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place," he said, pointing towards it with his wand. "It was left to Harry Potter upon the death of its last familial owner, his Godfather, Sirius Black. Therefore, when the property was passed on to him, Harry also inherited the servitude of the manor's house-elf… Kreacher, was what it went by. He summoned the elf to him in his imprisonment earlier today in an ill-suited attempt to escape."

The Dark Lord paused, crimson eyes gleaming when they met Harry's. "Was that a wise decision, Harry?" he asked, to which the Death Eaters all chuckled. Harry looked down, unwilling to meet any of their gazes.

"*Answer me.*"

Voldemort's tenor went from lightly amused to ice-cold in an instant. Though the snakes were still uncomfortably hot, Harry's skin broke out into goosebumps at the sound.

"…No," he finally muttered under his breath, still staring at the ground.

Voldemort's fingers clamped around his jaw, nails digging into his skin and forcing Harry to look at him. "No, *what*?"

And even though he was beyond terrified, even though he was surrounded by Death Eaters, his face in the Dark Lord's hands… Harry wouldn't do it.

He knew what the demented wizard expected him to say, and he refused. He outright *refused* to call him that.

"No, *Voldemort*, it wasn't wise."

Everyone gasped when he said his name, and Harry thought he even heard Draco yelp from the other end of the table. Voldemort's expression contorted as, for the briefest moment, he looked like he was going to do something truly horrible, and Harry braced himself for the pain that he'd expected in his scar the moment the Dark Lord had touched him—

But then he smiled… and laughed.

The Death Eaters surrounding him looked baffled at this most unexpected of reactions, glancing at each other nervously. "Isn't he a *fascinating* creature?" Voldemort jeered, his voice condescending in every sense of the word. His followers laughed then as well, though it was a bit hesitant. "Such a *bold* thing. I will take great pleasure in breaking you to pieces, Harry Potter… but not right now. I require your body to be functioning for at least a little while longer."

He flourished the Elder Wand again and a long quill materialized in his hand. It was extraordinarily sharp, and Harry recognized it as the same kind that Umbridge had forced him to write lines with years ago.

"This document states that Harry Potter has most graciously decided to gift his inheritance of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, to Bellatrix Lestrange, the witch who should have come into ownership of the home in the first place… as Harry hardly has any use for such things anymore."

Harry gaped, so outraged that he was at a loss for words. "Harry, *darling*! How very thoughtful of you, dear!" Bellatrix exclaimed, holding a hand to her chest and acting as though she was deeply flattered.

"Such a generous child," Voldemort agreed. He held the quill out towards him. "Sign here, Harry."

"No," he gasped, refusing the quill. "No, I won't, I—"

"*Sign.*"

The snakes flashed, burning and tightening around him. Harry's scar throbbed in pain, and before he knew what was happening, the binding around his right wrist had forced his arm into movement, and the quill was in his hand. A second later and he was flung across the table, bent over the parchment with his fingers hovering over the line with an 'X' before it.

"*Now.*"

The snake around his wrist jerked his unwilling hand into action, and then, quite against his will, Harry found himself signing his name in a very inelegant, messy scrawl. The words *'Harry James Potter'* were being carved into the skin on the back of his hand at the same time they were being written on the parchment, making him hiss in pain. The moment he finished, he felt a kind of cool, tingling sensation

sweep up his spine, and he knew it was magically binding.

"Very good," Voldemort drawled. He tapped his wand against the document, and it instantly curled back into a scroll. The signature remained imprinted on Harry's skin, weeping with blood—probably because he had been forced into applying far more pressure than was necessary when he'd signed. He stared at the back of his hand, furious.

Harry James Potter.

I must not tell lies.

He was riddled in scars.

"Thank you so much for your…generosity," Bellatrix purred, causing his eyes to snap up to hers. She winked, and everybody chuckled in amusement.

Except Draco. Harry just managed to glimpse his ill-concealed horror before Voldemort was speaking again.

"Now that we have *that* out of the way…"

With a mere flick of his wrist, Harry went flying, landing harshly back in the corner from whence he had come. There was another round of boisterous laughter, and soon the snakes had begun writhing around him again, keeping him down.

"I shall deal with you and your insubordinate nature soon, Harry, I promise you… But we have much work to do here, so I am afraid you must have patience. Do you think you can manage to remain silent and obedient for all of an hour?"

Harry glared up at him, hating him and everything about him—his smug expression, the glint in his eyes, the curl of his lips—he *hated* him. Bellatrix's high laughter sounded louder than everyone else's, and Harry thought of what she had done to Neville, of how the Dark Lord had orchestrated it, and before he knew it, the words were flying out of his mouth—

"You're a *fucking* monster… *Tom."*

Silence.

It fell in such a heavy wave that even the fire flickered at the sudden shift in the atmosphere. Voldemort's amused grin vanished, replaced

by a cold, emotionless mask.

"…Leave us."

Everyone ran. The fireplace, giant as it was, did not seem capable of getting them out of there quickly enough. The fastest disappeared in a flash of green, but others simply opted to bolt for the door at the end of the hall. It couldn't have been more than five seconds before they had all vanished, every last one of them. The door slammed shut of its own accord after they had gone.

Voldemort stood. The fear that had been eclipsed by Harry's sheer bull-headedness came rushing forward as the Dark Lord advanced on him, his movements slow and purposeful. He motioned for Harry to rise again, and the snakes answered his call. Voldemort didn't hesitate before grabbing his wrist and disapparating with him.

Harry couldn't help but wonder where the hell they had just been, for it to be some place where only Lord Voldemort could apparate in and out of, apparently—but it was a thought that was cut very short indeed as he was flung back onto the familiar stone floor of his cell. Kreacher's body and head, as well as the giant puddles of blood, were still there.

Then, surprisingly, Voldemort vanished the snakes. Their glowing bodies disappeared, enveloping them both in darkness. All Harry could see was piercing eyes and pale skin.

"Do you know what I could do to you, Harry?"

Voldemort knelt at his side, his voice deceptively… kind. Harry didn't say anything in response, nor did he move, despite the fact that he was no longer covered in animate, scorching bindings.

He reached down and, after a split second in which he hesitated, Voldemort began running his long, spidery fingers through his hair. Harry stiffened at the action, was about to pull away—

That inexplicable sensation of light and warmth swept across his skin, radiating from where Voldemort touched his scalp. He closed his eyes, nearly sighing, because it felt so comforting, so pleasant…

"I could pick apart your limbs so running would never be an option for you again," Voldemort whispered, almost lovingly. "I could rip out your tongue so speaking such disrespectful words against your master would be impossible…"

He said it all in such a tender tone that it was deeply disquieting, and Harry was sure that, were it not for the strange ripples of warmth permeating his very being at that moment, he would be horrified. And part of him was, but another part of him… *most* of him, was just… was just so…

"I could castrate you and leave you as less of a man than your dead house-elf," he murmured, his fingers leaving Harry's hair so that they could cup his face. He held his chin lightly, propping his face up so that when his eyes opened, he was looking directly into Voldemort's.

The warmth vanished.

The Dark Lord's blank expression became twisted when he grinned, a spark of sadistic glee glinting in his eyes that made Harry nauseous.

"I could force amortentia down your wretched throat, and you could see what it is like, to love a *fucking* monster."

Harry made a choked noise that could only be interpreted as a laugh, he was so far beyond fear. Voldemort's eyes narrowed at the sound, and for some reason, that just made him laugh more.

"Like mother like son, I guess," Harry spat, feeling delirious.

Voldemort looked uncharacteristically stunned. Harry's lips curled into a smirk at his expression.

The satisfied feeling didn't last long.

"*How did you know that*?" Voldemort seethed, fury cutting across his features. The Elder wand was pressed against Harry's throat so quickly that he hadn't even sensed the movement.

“Oh, I know *all about you*, Tom," Harry drawled, grinning more widely. "I know all about your sorry life… About your mum, about how you were born... You said your muggle father had his use in the graveyard that day you took his bone and my blood and got yourself a sorry excuse for a new body, but the best thing your dad ever gave you was his face. You probably would have had a much harder time wrapping the students and staff of Hogwarts around your finger if you had inherited *Merope Gaunt's* looks."

Harry laughed, and Voldemort looked so atypically horrified that Harry couldn't help but go on. "But I guess it doesn't matter, anymore. The outside matches the inside perfectly now. You look exactly like

what you really are." Harry paused, relishing the moment.

"A *monster*."

Voldemort's thunderstruck expression slid into one of cool indifference. There was a heartbeat of silence, then Harry was hurled across the room.

His back hit the stone wall, held against it by an invisible force which pinned him there. Voldemort rose to his feet as well, as inhumanly graceful in his movements as ever.

Harry struggled but couldn't move. The fear, all of the tumultuous anxiety which had been somehow muted before in recklessness, came crashing down.

"Is that what you see when you look at me, Harry?" Voldemort asked as he took a step towards him. His eyes flashed dangerously in the dark, vibrant and scarlet.

"And *now* what do you see?"

Harry's glasses shattered.

He hardly closed his eyes in time; slivers of glass went flying against his face—tiny, sharp fragments that he shook away at once. The empty frames fell to the floor, and when Harry blinked his eyelids open again, it was to find that his world, which had already been obscured by the bleakness of the cell, was infinitely hazier. The Dark Lord appeared before him as a blurry, white entity with unfocused blots of red for eyes.

He came closer still. Harry's breath caught in his throat when Voldemort came closer, and closer, too close—

"Do you remember the day you fell to me, Harry? Did you do as I asked? …Do you remember the sky?"

Harry swallowed thickly, his heart racing—there was something profoundly alarming about the way he was speaking, so gently, that made his skin crawl with foreboding—

Voldemort's unclear form was so near to him now that when he inhaled, he was once more hit with the familiar scent of blood on his breath. So cold. So unnatural.

And then, even stranger still, his already distorted outline was marred even further… Tendrils of what looked like smoke, maybe…

"Do you remember the stars, how they shone in my name? Do you recall how the heavens bore my mark, how that great constellation rested above the castle like a crown?"

Only it wasn't smoke, it was shimmery, and glowing faintly… It began swirling around his pale face like an ephemeral halo of silver…

It was… it was a memory.

"A gift," Voldemort said, and then he closed the small gap between their faces, touching their foreheads together. The moment he did, Harry's mind was drenched in a powerful wave of that weightlessness, and he felt himself falling, falling…

The world became bright and clear.

Before him materialized an impossible scene. Harry saw… He saw the sky, only it was the memory through the eyes of Lord Voldemort…

And it was *glorious.*

Harry couldn't help but think, then, that his own vision really was dreadful. Either that, or the Dark Lord merely saw things exceptionally well—possibly both. For the sky from Voldemort's point of view was nothing short of magnificent.

The stars shone with a pristine clarity, those celestial beings that formed the constellation of a snake within a skull. The colors in the sky were a cascade of indigo and violet and the barest hint of ruby towards the east, and they were so intense, so impossibly, passionately bright through his eyes, that Harry could have sworn there were delicate hues there that he had never even seen before, colors for which there were no names…

He was stunned by the all-encompassing beauty of it. Harry was left breathless, both by the vision and by that radiating lightness that pulsed deep in his soul, and it was his, and it was Voldemort's, and it was endless and they were inseparable—

The memory faded. The warmth faded. Everything turned black.

Harry blinked, momentarily overcome after such exhilarating sensations—but the cold of the cell brought him swiftly back to the

horror of his reality.

Whatever magical force that had been holding him to the wall dissipated, and Harry collapsed to the ground. He narrowed his eyes, looking on the floor for his shattered glasses, reaching his arms out, but he couldn't see them, he couldn't see *anything*…

He heard the gate creak open. Harry's head snapped up, peering through the darkness for Voldemort's pale skin and red eyes—

But he couldn't see them. He closed his eyes, and… no difference. None at all. There was only blackness; the same, unwavering, endless sea of darkness… whether his eyes were open or not.

Horror like Harry had never known gripped his heart. "I-I can't see," he gasped, his voice small and fearful. There was no response.

"You've… you've b-blinded me."

A long pause. Harry *knew* he was there, he could feel him, near him, could tell he was listening…

But when he spoke again, it was not from where Harry expected it to be. The Dark Lord was further away than he'd anticipated, he had crossed the cell and must have been on the other side of the gate, preparing to leave him.

"Another gift," Voldemort said softly.

The gate swung shut, and Harry learned what true darkness really was.

The Monster You Don't See

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Blindness.

For a long time after the Dark Lord left, Harry tried to deny it. He closed his unseeing eyes and covered his hands with his face, like maybe he could convince himself that everything that had happened in the past several days, weeks, years… That all of it was just one long, horrid nightmare, and that when he eventually passed out from sheer exhaustion he would wake up in his dorm in Gryffindor tower to a world that had not yet seen the resurrection of a Dark Lord. Unfortunately, sleep would not come to him. Harry was too unsettled to stifle his racing thoughts, or even entertain the idea of clearing his mind.

But he kept his eyes closed.

Harry had already thought that the cell was dark, but now he knew what darkness *really* was. Before, at least, he had been able to see his own hand when he held it in front of his face. Now there was nothing, and he knew there would be nothing if he checked again… and so he didn't.

Harry trembled in the cold, for he was naked, now, his robes having been reduced to nothing but ashes. He crawled forward, the hard floor biting painfully into his knees as he did. He realized then just how helpless he was. What would he do when he had to use the bathroom? How would he get to it? He couldn't even locate the enchanted blanket and pillow Narcissa had given him without feeling waves of despair. After just a few seconds of trying to find them, Harry recoiled back to his seated position against the two walls of the corner, leaning against the stones like they were an anchor. The walls gave him some sense of direction, knowing he was on the opposite side of the gate; an irrational sensation of security. Being out in the middle of the cell felt like being lost in the ocean.

It was illogical to think that way. Harry knew that, but it didn't stop it from being true. He pressed his body harder against the wall behind him, keeping his eyes closed as he attempted to breathe properly. He was sure that the blanket and the warmth it provided were less than a

few feet away… yet he found that he couldn't remove himself from the false refuge of the corner he had backed himself into.

Harry remained there, quivering, cold, and afraid.

Indigo.

Harry was still sitting in the same spot, torrid thoughts whirling, when he… he thought he… well, not *saw*, exactly, but… *felt*…indigo.

It was a subtle shift, a gentle one. Apprehensive, and… concerned. The darkness of his world seemed thinly tinted by this deep, blue hue, and Harry lifted his head, though he kept his eyes shut.

Light footsteps… and then the gate creaked open. Harry held his breath.

"I-I've brought you more clothes, child, I was told you would need them…"

Narcissa.

Harry felt a rush of relief, but it was a feeling that lasted only a moment. She came closer to him, he could hear her movements, but despair crashed over him again when she did. Because he knew with certainty, now…

"Why are your eyes closed?"

Narcissa's presence was *always* proceeded by the glow of her wand, and Harry couldn't see it. Even through his eyelids, he should have been able to process the light. But there was only darkness.

There was nothing he could do to prevent the horrible sob that came out of his throat. When she placed her fingers under his chin, Harry quickly turned away, stifling his cries as best he could.

"Let me see," she demanded, gentle but resolute. "I won't hurt you, I promise, I'm only here to help. Let me see."

For a moment, Harry considered shoving her back, batting out and pushing her soft hands from his face, but he knew that was both pointless and unfair. It was not Narcissa Malfoy who had done this to him, and it wasn't as though pretending was going to make his reality any less horrifying. Slowly, begrudgingly, Harry opened his eyes.

Nothing changed, and yet everything did.

The subtle indigo brightened, flashing a strange, abysmal tint of muddy yellow. And it was the strangest thing, because Harry could have sworn there was a *taste* in his mouth to accompany it. Something sharp and bitter.

The outlandish sensations were gone before he could fully process them. "My God…" Narcissa murmured, horror evident in her voice. "What… what has he done to you…?"

Harry didn't want to say it, couldn't admit it out. He shook his head dismally, another pained sob issuing from his throat.

"Are you… Are you *blind*, child…?"

She asked it in tones of deepest dismay. Harry found that it was, at least, easier to nod than speak.

A few seconds passed in which Narcissa was silent, having dropped her hand from his face, obviously distraught. Harry could contain the devastation of this tragedy no longer, and he began to openly weep.

Something broke in Narcissa. For all of her previous efforts in keeping her distance from him, in which she would simply bring him food and water and leave as quickly as possible in order to avoid the Dark Lord… Now she seemed to throw all caution to the wind, and pulled the poor, broken form of Harry Potter towards her, cradling his shaking body like only a mother could.

Narcissa wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and Harry felt the overwhelmingly welcome sensation of the enchanted blanket being draped over him. His head fell against her chest, and she started rubbing his back through the cloth.

Harry didn't stop her, nor did he want to. He had never been held like this before, in such a tender, parental way. He cried into the fabric of her robes, arms around her waist and holding onto her like her embrace alone might hold him together. She rested her chin on the top of his head, murmuring words that were indiscernible but nonetheless comforting while he cried.

It went on for quite some time. By the time Harry's sobbing finally quieted, he was sure that at least an hour must have passed. He could not possibly find the words to express his gratitude to her for staying with him, for not immediately leaving him alone in his new world of

darkness.

They fell into silence. Narcissa held him, this boy who was no longer crying but so devastated. She continued to rub Harry's back, occasionally running her fingers up through his hair in an absent-minded attempt to disentangle it.

"…It will be temporary," she eventually murmured, her voice soft. "It… This is a punishment, child, and… and it w-won't be permanent…"

Harry nodded, but he could tell by the tone of her voice that she was not entirely sure that it *would* be temporary. For how could anyone predict the actions of a psychotic Dark Lord?

"I heard that you were very… *bold,* at the meeting." She paused, swallowing thickly. When Harry said nothing, she went on. "You cannot do that, child. Y-you must do as he says. You must act obediently, you must be submissive. You must… endear yourself to him."

Harry snorted, an involuntary reaction that surprised even him. Be submissive? *Endear himself*? To *Lord Voldemort*?

Harry didn't voice his apprehension, but he didn't have to. "I know that goes against everything you stand for," Narcissa said. "I know that it sounds, perhaps… unlikely, to win his favor, but… but *nothing* good can come from angering him. Do you understand me? Nothing at all."

Narcissa ceased running her fingers through his hair. "Do you understand me?" she asked again, her tone suddenly much firmer—a very motherly tone, indeed. Harry nodded, still unwilling to speak.

She resumed her pleasant but ultimately pointless attempt at fixing his hair. For another long stretch of time, they were quiet, and Harry was content to bask in the warmth of the blanket which radiated heat and her calming embrace. His mind felt oddly numb. He was mentally exhausted, and under the gentle ministrations of her fingers against his scalp, Harry thought he might actually drift off to sleep…

"…I… was thinking of something, earlier today," she said, instantly making Harry alert. "Of that time when we met in Madam Malkin's, when I was with my son."

Harry racked his brains, wondering what on earth she was talking about—and then it came to him. Over a year ago, when he, Ron and

Hermione had needed new robes, before their sixth year… They had run into Draco Malfoy and his mother…

It felt like someone else's life, that memory. Narcissa cleared her throat before speaking again. "I apologize for what I said. About your Godfather. About Sirius. That was cruel."

Harry's mind buzzed, wondering why she was bringing this up at all. He finally forced himself to respond when he recalled what it was that *he* had spat at Narcissa to make her say that in the first place. "You don't need to apologize to me," Harry said hoarsely. "I had j-just insulted your husband…"

"That's no excuse," she said. "My husband was in prison, true, but he was alive… *is* still alive. Your Godfather is not. I should not have said that. The dead deserve our respect, especially those whose lives ended so tragically."

Harry was stunned at all she was saying. To hear Narcissa Malfoy speaking about Sirius Black in a way that was not entirely spiteful… Then, as if in response to this very thought, she said:

"He was my cousin, after all."

Harry had forgotten that. For some reason, his troubled mind had placed Bellatrix and Narcissa in completely different categories, and he remembered only now that they were, in fact, sisters. The two witches could not have been more different, both in looks and in dispositions. Narcissa was light and fair, while Bellatrix…

The sound of Narcissa's laughter derailed Harry's thoughts, it was so unexpected. Harry lifted his head from her moving chest, confused. "I remember when we were younger, when we were all students," she explained, and though he could not see her, Harry knew there was a smile on her lips. "Sirius. I was a few years above him, a fifth-year. I had just been made prefect for Slytherin… He was one of the first to be sorted. And then he had the audacity to go against Black family tradition, to be put in *Gryffindor.*"

She laughed again. Harry couldn't help but crack a smile as well. "He was proud of that," he murmured.

"Oh, I *know* he was," Narcissa agreed, sounding both annoyed and amused. "It felt like my dear cousin existed solely to make my life more difficult, even when he was just a first-year. I gave him more detentions than anyone else. Him and… and your father, both."

Harry's breath hitched in his throat. This was definitely a thought that had never occurred to him before. Draco's parents having gone to Hogwarts at the same time as his own…

"First-year students, and by far the most obnoxious," she continued in that same tone of irately bemused. "Sirius and James. And while most Gryffindors and Slytherins had it out for each other, those two took it to new extremes. Sirius was the epitome of familial backlash, and his new friend was more than supportive. They pulled their little pranks every chance they got. Once, they even managed to enchant these dung bombs so that they wouldn't go off right away. They must have snuck them into Severus's bag right before he came into the common room… Oh, it was awful." She sounded annoyed, but when she laughed, it was a genuine sound. "The Slytherin dorms smelled horrid all day."

Harry couldn't believe that he was smiling. The foreign expression felt painful on his face.

But it was an odd, hollow happiness; an amusement that was laced with a deep sadness. Sirius, his father… Even Snape, now…

All dead…

"And they only got worse with age," Narcissa continued. "By the time I was a seventh-year, they had multiplied. Remus Lupin had joined their little group, and while he wasn't as loud or outwardly annoying, he was a dangerous addition. He had a sort of intellect about him that made their pranks less frequent, but much more… efficient. And Pettigrew… Well, I honestly have no idea why they let him hang around."

Harry bristled at the name. *Pettigrew*… But he, too, was dead… As was Remus…

All dead…

"I'm sure you hear it all the time, but you really do look just like your father. The resemblance in uncanny."

"Yeah," Harry said, his voice still rather gravelly. "I've been told once or twice."

She laughed. Harry waited, sure that the next part of the observation concerning his resemblance to his parents was coming. "Except, of course, your eyes." Narcissa paused, swallowing audibly and carding

her fingers through his hair again. "Your eyes… They were just like your mother's."

The pause that followed this statement was heavy and dark. Harry's blood ran cold.

Were?

…His mouth seemed unwilling to move, his lips unable to ask.

"I remember her, too," Narcissa eventually said, her tone much lighter. "Your mother. Nothing at all like your father or Sirius. At least, not while I was still at school. She was quieter when she was younger, very studious… And oh, Slughorn just *loved* her."

Narcissa was clearly bitter about this fact, even all these years later. Harry listened with rapt attention. "Lily Evans, only in her second year, and already being invited to Slughorn's little get-togethers, right alongside students like Lucius and me. He usually only brought in older students, mind you, and generally he favored those in his own house… It wasn't very often that he was interested in someone so young. And then to find out that she was in Gryffindor, and a *muggle-born*, and so pretty and charming, well…"

She laughed again. "Naturally, we all hated her."

Harry, amazingly, found that he was laughing as well. It made his chest ache.

"Cheeky little thing, your mother. She made all sorts of bold, witty remarks that most of us never would have dared… and Slughorn just loved her all the more for it. He doted on her, it was infuriating." Narcissa sighed, shaking her head. "I apologize. I'm rambling…"

"No," Harry said quickly. "I… I don't mind." He paused, then, as the depressing realization washed over him. He did not *want* Narcissa to leave him, not at all. "But… H-he could show up any moment, and if he knows, if he sees—"

Harry's concerns died in his throat. Suddenly, like a cold breeze sweeping across his mind, Harry could have sworn he felt *something—his* presence, blacker even than this new world of darkness, and with it a sensation of unnatural iciness that rolled over his skin—

But the frigid feeling lasted only a moment. Harry shivered, and Narcissa wrapped the blanket more tightly around him in response. He

must have… he must have imagined it, that sinister energy of Lord Voldemort, by thinking of him just now… For surely, if the Dark Lord were actually there, Narcissa would see him, and he would make his presence known, would do something horrible upon arriving…

Harry shuddered again. He did not want to imagine what Voldemort might do to Narcissa and him if they were discovered like this, with her cradling Harry in her arms and reminiscing about his *parents*, of all things…

Narcissa's muscles tensed, clearly thinking along the same lines. "Yes, I should leave soon. But first… Here, I brought you clothes…"

Nodding and feeling deeply embarrassed, Harry allowed her help him up. Narcissa was slow and sympathetic, taking her time with helping him into the new robes she had brought him, which were surprisingly soft (he wondered if they, too, were bewitched to look tattered yet feel new, but he did not ask). She then beseeched him to drink some water and eat as much bread as he could, which was very little. Afterwards, she showed him how to feel his way towards the bathroom along the stone walls so that he could find it on his own.

Harry had never felt more powerless.

Narcissa's hand found its way under his chin, cupping his face. Harry was sure that she was examining him, though he refused to open his eyes again. What had meant, when she'd said his eyes *were* just like his mother's…?

Again, he could not bring himself to ask.

"You do not look well, child…" Narcissa murmured. And then, "Wait. I will be back in just a moment."

She stood, and Harry heard her echoing footsteps and the sound of the gate closing when she went. After she was gone, he noticed that the odd tint of blue, which he had grown accustomed to in her presence, had vanished.

Odd.

He pulled the blanket more tightly around his shoulders. Harry took a deep breath in, and decided, in her absence, to attempt Occlumency again.

Empty your mind.

Think of nothing, think of no one…

Empty your mind.

Empty your—

Indigo, again.

Odd. Very odd. He perceived the minor shift in the atmosphere. Small, yes, but definitely there.

The gate opened. "Here," Narcissa said, and then there was something being pressed to his lips. "This is a nutrition elixir. It doesn't taste very good, I'll be honest, but there's not very much, and it's full of vitamins and minerals. Things your body needs to recover…"

Harry nodded and dutifully accepted the vial. She was right. The elixir tasted awful, quite reminiscent of the Polyjuice Potion he'd taken in his second year. Harry grimaced when she took the empty vial back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"One more thing," she said. Harry waited, and was surprised to feel another goblet being pressed to his lips. He inhaled the aroma of something familiar, a bit like lavender.

"It's a Dreamless Draught," Narcissa explained. Harry's brows raised in surprise, though he continued to keep his eyes closed. Such a thing seemed like a luxury that Voldemort would not be pleased about.

"Won't you be punished, if he finds out?" Harry whispered, gently pushing the goblet away.

Narcissa grabbed his hand and squeezed his fingers reassuringly. "One cannot be *well* if they are not properly resting, child," she said, almost chidingly. He cracked a small smile at her tone. Probably, he mused, he should find it a bit condescending, the way that she called him 'child' and spoke to him as such—but he didn't. He found it comforting, and really didn't mind it at all, coming from her.

So Harry nodded, allowing her to place the rim of the cup to his lips, and drank deeply. It tasted like chamomile, a much more pleasant taste than the previous concoction.

It was a *good* Dreamless Draught, too. Harry instantly felt drowsy. Narcissa pulled the goblet away and placed her hands on his shoulders, guiding his body back so that he was laying down with his

head on the enchanted pillow. She even tucked him in, making sure the blanket was snug around him on all sides.

"Th…thank…" Harry tried to express his gratefulness, but the potion was too powerful. Already he was drifting off. He heard laughter, quiet and feminine, and thought he felt the soft sensation of lips being pressed chastely to his forehead…

And the next thing he knew, Harry was lost to slumber, deep and blissfully dreamless.

When he opened his eyes, it was to pure darkness.

When he closed his eyes again, it was exactly the same.

Harry cringed. There was no momentary reprieve of confusion when he awoke this time. He was perfectly aware of where he was and what had happened to him.

He was blind.

Harry was blind, and Voldemort had done it to him… All because of his damn *mouth.*

Why had he said those stupid, stupid things? Why had he, Harry, felt the need to call him a monster, call him *Tom?* To comment on his mother's looks, of all things? And then, perhaps even more interestingly… Why had that last part bothered Voldemort as much as it did?

Was it simply because he was enraged that Harry knew of his secretive past in the first place? Or was Voldemort actually offended that Harry had essentially called him… ugly?

Harry assumed that it must be the former of the two. Surely the Dark Lord was unconcerned with such trivial things as appearances…

But he hadn't *sounded* unconcerned.

Harry sighed, realizing that it didn't really matter one way or another, now. Voldemort had blinded him out of spite, and if he ever hoped to get his sight back…

What did the Dark Lord even *want* from him?

That was a far more pertinent question. What in the world did

Voldemort *want* from the fallen Chosen One? Who the entire wizarding world now thought missing, save for his Death Eaters… The thorn in his side whom he could not kill, because Harry had a fragment of the Dark Lord's soul within him…

Harry had no idea.

The one thing he could be sure of, though, was that Voldemort was probably searching for a way to get that very soul fragment out of the body of Harry James Potter. Then he could place it in something else, and finally do what he's always wanted to do—kill his prophesized enemy once and for all.

But Harry had a horrible, sinking feeling that Voldemort wouldn't be able to.

Remorse…

'*You've got to really feel what you've done… Apparently the pain of it can destroy you. I can't see Voldemort attempting it somehow, can you?*'

Hermione's words echoed in his head. Unfortunately, he was inclined to agree.

So if Voldemort couldn't get it out, and he couldn't kill him… What did he plan on doing with his human horcrux? If he was Lord Voldemort's last tie to immortality—and he *was*—then… Well, what about *him*?

He, Harry, wasn't immortal. What about when *he* died? He would age, he would grow old… Someday, somehow, Harry Potter would inevitably die. And then what? Lord Voldemort would be mortal once more…

Harry was just mulling these thoughts over when he felt it.

That same, frigid feeling that made his hairs stand on end. Deeply disquieting and radiating a blackness so dark that Harry shuddered. There were no footsteps to accompany it, no screeching of the gate swinging open, but Harry sensed it. He kept completely still, his posture rigid. Was *he* really there, or was Harry imagining it again?

Harry waited.

The seconds stretched on, turning into long, painful minutes. The cold atmosphere never shifted, stagnant and suffocating. Voldemort did not

announce his presence, and Harry did not acknowledge that he felt him. And Harry refused, outright *refused* to beg… even if it was for something as invaluable as his sight.

The silence continued, strained.

…*Was* he there?

Just as Harry was beginning to think that maybe it really was all in his head, there was a spark of something else. Something new… something light, and it was getting closer…

Long, spidery fingers grazed Harry's cheek. Warmth, blissful and weightless, danced across his skin and swept away all of the previous feelings of iciness. Harry resisted the urge to lean into him, towards that magnetic buoyancy—but then Voldemort placed his other hand on Harry's face, and there was no stopping it. Harry gasped, his head falling forward at the sudden increase of it, that beautiful sensation that was so strong, so irresistible, wanting more, *more*… But was that feverish desire his, or the Dark Lord's…?

"A gift…"

Voldemort's voice was a sigh on his lips. Harry felt the cool breath of his words against his skin, tantalizingly soft… and then their foreheads touched, and the sea of darkness fell away.

Harry *saw*…

It was… it was a forest. Harry was in the woods, standing firmly on his feet in some part of the country he did not recognize.

It was *beautiful.*

Trees in various hues of gold and red were all around him, the telltale signs of early autumn. But it was the sheer clarity of the vision that was most astounding. Harry had never personally experienced the world like this. His sight, even with glasses, had never been so crystal-clear, so vivid.

Harry gazed in amazement at the radiant varieties of colored leaves, the bright and cheery yellows and oranges. They were still mostly on the branches, but occasionally a gust of wind would pass through, causing a few to flutter off towards the ground.

Harry was smiling, totally lost in the blissful sensations of light and

color and *sight*… until the sound of people shouting caused him to turn.

Children. He could see them through the trees, a group of children playing on the grass in the distance. Harry was just about to walk over to them when something—some*one*—else caught his eye.

One lone child was headed towards him. A boy. He was smirking as he walked, unnaturally quiet in his movements. Harry stared at him in shock.

It was Tom Riddle.

Harry knew it; he would recognize that pale skin and those dark eyes anywhere. But he was young, much younger than when Harry had seen him as a child in Dumbledore's memory. *This* Tom Riddle couldn't have been more than four or five years old. He walked with a surprising grace, considering his age and size. He looked smug. Harry got the feeling that this, sneaking off into the woods by himself, was something that the young Tom Riddle knew that he was not supposed to be doing.

Harry gaped, perplexed. Why was Voldemort showing him a memory from when he was a *child*…?

But Harry followed along anyway, realizing that he wouldn't have much say in the matter even if he hadn't wanted to watch. Which of course he *did*, because it was glorious, being able to see again, with such immaculate, perfect vision…

Tom Riddle sauntered through the woods, the unseen ghost of Harry Potter at his side.

For a few minutes, this was all they did—walked through the warm-colored trees underneath a bright, blue sky. And really, that would have been enough for Harry. It was a stunning forest, and he found himself quite content just walking and looking around, appreciating nature in a way that he never had before.

Then they came to a small clearing. Tom smiled when he happened upon it and the bubbling creek which cut through the middle. He knelt down, reaching his tiny hands into the water and cupping them, only to let the liquid sift through his fingers right back into the brook. He laughed, doing this no less than five more times, like he found the simple fluidity of water fascinating.

He paused when a leaf fell from a tree, fluttering towards him. Tom looked up, eyes wide and hands currently full of water—

The leaf froze.

Harry watched in amazement as the crimson leaf remained there, hovering right in front of his face, remaining in place. Tom looked even more shocked than Harry did—he dropped his hands, splashing water down his front when he did, but he hardly seemed to notice. His attention was fixed on the leaf, his gaze filled with wonder.

Tom reached out, slowly. Harry thought for sure that he was going to grab it, but then, to his surprise, he stopped short. Tom held his hand in front of the floating leaf, and instead of wrapping his fingers around it, he moved his arm to the side… and the leaf followed.

He was *moving* it. Tom beamed as he wandlessly, wordlessly, *purposefully* guided the single leaf in a circle around him, twisting and twirling in midair as he slowly spun. Harry could tell by his radiant smile that this was the first time Voldemort, as a child, had performed magic. And it wasn't some kind of life-saving accident, either… It was *intentional*.

Another puff of wind blew through the air, and more leaves fell. Tom reached his other hand out, his smile faltering for a second as his brows furrowed in concentration… and, to Harry's amazement, he managed to make *those* leaves float too, just like the first one.

His grin was back in full force. Tom began to spin, then, both arms extended. As he did, the leaves moved with him, circling around him, orbiting him like he was the sun and they were his fluttering planets. Tom started spinning faster, laughing. The leaves matched his pace, and when the next gust of wind freed dozens more from their branches, he collected more bits of gold, red, and orange.

Tom Riddle was a miniature, human tornado, surrounded by colors and the dancing wind. He turned faster and faster, laughing the entire time, dark eyes shining with joy. It was an infectious feeling, and Harry found himself smiling just as broadly.

The memory started to blur.

Harry exhaled sharply, his bleak reality rising up to greet him. He desperately tried to cling to some scrap of light, not wanting to lose that precious vision, but it was fading, as was the sound of Tom Riddle's childish laughter. The warmth, the weightless sensation, the

Dark Lord's hands on his face… They all began to fade.

By the time Harry had fully returned to his horrific present, Voldemort was gone. The darkness of his cell was no longer charged with his sinister energy, but was the empty, hollow sea of shadows that held no one and nothing.

Harry pulled his knees to his chest, feeling dazed and strangely abandoned… unable to do anything other than wonder why Lord Voldemort had shared that with him.

Chapter End Notes

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Sweetness

"How are you feeling?"

Not long after Voldemort had made his mysterious exit, Narcissa returned. And with her, that strange, subtle… *flavor* of indigo.

Flavor. That was the word that Harry found himself thinking of to describe it. Because he couldn't *see* it, he couldn't see anything at all, but… deep blue, when she was near.

Well… most of the time, at least.

"Child? Are you all right?"

When he didn't answer right away, the atmosphere shifted slightly. More of a bright, green-ish blue color. Less pleasant, more… *worried.*

She was worried. Harry cleared his throat, turning his head in her direction. "Yes," he said. "I'm fine."

Harry heard Narcissa kneel beside him, felt her soft hand on his shoulder. The green tint vanished, suddenly all dark navy again, calm and relieved.

"I brought more water. And… I know it's not very palatable, but I have another nutrition elixir for you, too."

Harry's ability to hide his grimace must have been very poor, because Narcissa laughed. "I know. But I have something else, too, if you manage to keep it down. A surprise."

"A surprise?" Harry asked, his eyes closed but brows raised. What in the world could Narcissa bring him as a *surprise*?

"Yes. But I'm not giving it to you until you take this elixir."

Harry felt the vial bring pressed to his lips, and he grinned crookedly when he took it. He wondered if this was the sort of thing Narcissa Malfoy had to do often in order to get her son to behave properly. It was no wonder Draco was so spoiled.

But Harry said nothing, only swallowed back the foul concoction. Narcissa took the vial away and replaced it with a goblet of water, which he then drank from deeply, trying and failing to rid himself of

the disgusting taste in his mouth.

Narcissa pulled the cup away quickly, too. "Here," she said, and Harry almost jumped, because the color had suddenly shifted again—something rosier and warmer. Lighter… *excited*. "I know it's not much, but, well, after drinking that dreadful stuff…"

Something small and hard was pressed into his palm. Harry examined it with his fingers, curious. Something on a stick…

He figured it out at the same time that she said it. "Sweet Crystals, from Honeydukes," she explained, and the pink-ish tint in the air brightened. "They were my favorite when I was a girl. Well, they still are, to be honest. Don't tell anyone."

Harry laughed. "I'll never tell a soul," he promised, grinning.

"Good. Then I won't need to feel guilty about having one with you, then." Harry heard the goblet being set aside. Narcissa shifted her weight until she was sitting next to him, their shoulders touching. "When I was nine, I contracted this horrible illness. The Black Cat Flu, ever heard of it? Awful sickness. I couldn't eat, I could hardly keep water down, even. I got so bad that I ended up in St. Mungo's for nearly a week. I lived on nothing but those nutrition elixirs for *days*."

Harry tentatively licked the surface of his treat, listening while he wondered what color the Sweet Crystal in his hand was. He was pretty sure they were all just sugar, though. He definitely didn't notice any particular flavor—just pure sweetness.

"So my father would sneak me in Sweet Crystals," she went on. "I couldn't keep down real food, but I could certainly eat candy. The promise of sugar made taking the elixirs bearable. At least, for me. As a nine-year-old. Not that you're nine, but I thought you might like one."

Harry found himself feeling amused rather than offended by any means. "You're never too old for candy, so far as I'm concerned," he said.

Narcissa paused, and Harry almost wondered if he'd said the wrong thing. "Well played," she eventually murmured, and Harry could practically *feel* her smile. "Cheers to that."

Harry licked his crystal stick again, trying once more to discern any unique flavor. There was none. "What color is mine?" he asked, even

though he knew it hardly mattered. "Just curious."

"Simple, unexciting clear," she answered. "I thought to give you the green one that I am currently enjoying, but I can't have your mouth colored oddly. It would be incriminating evidence."

Harry thought about that, about what the Dark Lord might do if he noticed that his captive inexplicably had a green tongue and lips. He couldn't help but snort at the notion.

"That was a lie," Narcissa continued jokingly. "I actually just wanted the green one for myself. I am a selfish, horrible person. I think it stems from being a youngest child."

"You are anything but a selfish, horrible person," Harry said. Narcissa didn't respond, though she did drape an arm over his shoulder.

They fell into silence, each enjoying their secret treat. The Sugar Crystals were small, and therefore didn't last long, but the sweetness really did get rid of all lingering tartness from the elixir.

"There's still no news of your friends," Narcissa eventually said, taking the empty stick from his hand. "They're still on the run…"

Harry swallowed hard. He had been pointedly not asking, sure that if there *was* news, he would find out soon enough. "Everyone still thinks I'm missing then, too?"

"Yes. Things have been very busy at the Ministry and elsewhere. The wizarding world is in a hectic state now that the war is over and the Dark Lord is officially victorious…"

At the mention of Voldemort, Harry instantly bristled—he felt it, sharp and frigid, like a slip of icy silk being dragged up his spine, soft but deathly cold—

But then, just as he noticed it, the feeling was gone, and Harry was sure he'd imagined it.

Narcissa went on, oblivious to his sudden rigidity. "New policies are being put into place, old laws are being overturned, re-written, or abolished completely… I daresay that the Dark Lord will not be back here anytime soon."

It was clear by the way she said it that Narcissa was not sure if this was good news or not. It was good, as it meant that he was not going

to be tortured anytime soon…

But it was bad, as it also meant that there was no getting his sight back in the near future.

Harry fidgeted uncomfortably, unsure of what to say. "But I'll come back more often. Maybe… maybe…" Narcissa's voice trailed off thoughtfully. "Well. Anyway. Yes, I'll come back when I can. Here."

Harry felt a familiar rush of coolness wash over his body. A cleaning charm. "Someday, I will experience a shower again," Harry muttered, shaking his head. "I… I'm sorry you have to deal with taking care of me. I just… I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for. Not to me. Not ever." Narcissa leaned forward and embraced him. The veil of blue turned a deep, saturated violet as she did. "You saved my son," she whispered. "I will never forget that, child."

Then she sniffed loudly and let him go. "I will be back soon," she vowed. Harry heard her shuffling away, gently closing the gate behind her.

And he couldn't be sure, because he was unable see her…but Harry was fairly certain that she had begun to cry.

Narcissa's prediction of a Voldemort-less existence proved to be very wrong, very soon. It couldn't have been more than an hour before Harry felt it again—that black, chilly energy in the air, dark and slightly nauseating.

Their *magic*, Harry realized, precipitously yet inexplicably certain. He was sensing their *magic*…

He didn't have time to linger on this comprehension long. Rather than stand there and silently observe him for a time, the Dark Lord did not enter stealthily. The gate opened with its usual, high-pitched screech, and Harry snapped his head up at the sound as though surprised. He stiffened, held his breath, and didn't move.

Voldemort walked towards him with measured, clearly audible footsteps. Like he wanted Harry to know exactly where he was, exactly how close he was getting.

Closer… and closer…

The Dark Lord stopped when he must have been right in front of him. Harry was sure that if he reached out, his hand would graze the dark wizard's leg. Naturally, Harry retracted further away instead, pressing his back into the wall.

But there was no escaping the Dark Lord.

Seconds later, and Voldemort was leaning down, his cool fingers gliding over Harry's forehead, lingering on his scar. No warmth, no light—but no pain, either. Harry didn't do or say anything, only sat there, stock-still. Refusing to react. Refusing to give him anything at all.

…Until a single digit touched his mouth. An unnaturally cold thumb was being pressed onto his lower lip, tracing the shape of his mouth, unnervingly gently. Harry sucked in a breath at the unexpected motion, and the very slight but noticeable rush of lightness that accompanied it.

The blackness—that impenetrable, ominous energy that simply *was* Lord Voldemort—did something that Harry would have thought impossible, and darkened even further. And at the same time, something almost… bitter and harsh tasting, something *ugly*.

But Voldemort continued his tender action of outlining his lips, and when he spoke, it was in a deceptively kind tone. "How very resilient you are, my *soul*… How precious. How… *sweet*."

Harry's muscles tensed at the insinuation being made. Did he… did he *know*, about Narcissa granting him a kindness? Or was it just some kind of sick coincidence with his choice of words?

Harry didn't have a chance to ask. The surge of fear that plagued him was washed away almost at once, replaced by that dizzying, beautiful buoyancy, that weightlessness…

And it *was* weightless, the feeling that coursed through him, thrumming through his skin, his bones, his very being. It was beautiful, and it was whole, and it was perfect… Harry wanted to sing with the loveliness of it all, wanted to sink into the feeling and never resurface…

Then light, *real* light, was flashing across his mind… He was seeing, but it was not with his eyes which he saw… *himself;* it was he, Harry, but no—

This boy, he was looking at this impossible human… This entity which he owned in every conceivable way, and yet was so inexplicable, so beyond logic—this mystery who was leaning into his hand, his breath hitching in his throat, chest heaving, lips parting, and there was such *light*, such purity—it was irresistible, it was *fascinating*—he wanted it, *needed*—

It lasted only a second. Harry's existence had gone from black to white and back again, but the buoyant feeling never dissipated. Voldemort was still holding his face, and he had… Harry had experienced the world through Voldemort's mind, through the Dark Lord's eyes, again... And while Harry, personally, felt that magnetic pull in his own mind, it was nothing compared to what he felt while in Lord Voldemort's psyche. That longing for light, that insatiable desire…

Feeling confused, disoriented, and awash in that pleasant, dizzying sea of warmth, Harry did something that he had never done before. Without really knowing why, he reached with his own hands to try and find the Dark Lord's face. It was a slow, controlled action, as he was unable to see, but Voldemort didn't stop him, and soon his fingers found disquietingly cold skin and hollowed cheeks. It was such a contrast to the warmth that was currently flooding through his soul, their souls…

As Harry ran his own fingers cautiously along this murderer's jawline, he couldn't help but wonder—what must such a life be like? To be so cold, to be so eternally chilled…?

"A gift…"

Voldemort whispered the words, his fingers ghosting over Harry's own before their foreheads touched. Once more, the ocean of shadows dissolved, becoming something bright and *visible*…

…Harry *saw*…

He saw… but no… it couldn't be…

The Quidditch pitch?

Harry landed firmly on what he knew at once to be a most familiar, beloved landscape.

It was, it *was* the Quidditch pitch! Bright green grass and an endless sky of cloudy but harmless gray... Perfect flying conditions. The smile that stretched across Harry's face was painful, it was so wide. His best

memories of Hogwarts had been made here, on these very grounds, soaring through the air… When, no matter what turmoil was plaguing his current existence, it had just been he and that dastardly little, golden ball… Harry Potter and the snitch, and while the winged orb was active, all of his worries of the oncoming war, Death Eaters, and their Dark Lord were forgotten.

As if on cue, at that thought, Harry saw *him*.

Tom Riddle was much more recognizable in this memory.

Eleven, and looking exactly as he had in Dumbledore's memory from the orphanage. He was with the rest of his class. The first-year Slytherins, by the looks of it, and the Gryffindors, probably…

Yes, definitely the Gryffindors. Harry could tell by the way the two groups were shifting away from each other, by how they split so evenly down the center. Obvious animosity—just as it had been when he was in school, if not even more pronounced. They lined up, each child taking a designated spot next to a broom, which all lay on the ground in the grass…

Oh my God, Harry thought in shock. This vision, this *memory*—this was Tom Riddle's *first flying lesson*.

Suddenly intensely interested in seeing how this would play out, Harry turned to watch the young Tom Riddle, who was staring down at the broom at his feet with a blank expression on his face.

A portly man with thick, gray hair who had been pacing the grounds stopped once they each found a broom. "My name is Mister Carswell," he announced, making most of the first-years fall silent. "I will be your flying instructor. Now, there are many different strategies for flying, many methods which I could sit here and try to explain to you—but years of teaching have forced me to come to terms with the fact that this would be useless, as none of you would pay attention anyway, just as most of you aren't paying attention now. *Abbot!"*

A boy on the Gryffindor side, who had been whispering under his breath to a friend, jumped at the sound of his name. "Quit blathering about your supposed flying prowess and listen up!" the teacher barked. Abbot flushed, but held his tongue. "Now, my approach to teaching the fine art of flying is… to just let you lot figure it out on your own. *Ha*!"

Mister Carswell let out a loud bark of laughter. Harry decided that he

liked him. "This isn't Potions class, I'm not going to talk your ear off like Slughorn. Some things you just have to *do!* Now, everyone, put your hand up above your broom, and say—with confidence!—'up'!"

Most of the first-years looked at each other nervously, but several of them didn't wait, and instead instantly began trying to summon their brooms.

Tom Riddle was one of those who did not hesitate.

"Up." He didn't shout the word like most of the other children. In fact, he said it so quietly that Harry barely heard it. Yet the moment the command left his lips, the broom sprung into his hands. It was the very first of the group's to do so.

The other first-years stared at him—the Slytherins in disbelief, the Gryffindors in obvious irritation—but Tom didn't react to any of it. He just held the broom in one hand, looking towards the instructor and waiting patiently for the next step.

Harry, personally, found himself feeling conflicted. One the one hand, he was impressed, just as the other Slytherin students were. But on the other hand, he was, perhaps childishly, *annoyed*.

Flying—and, consequently, Quidditch—had always been Harry's only talent. Sure, he was decent at a number of other things, but flying… That had been his true skill, his only claim to fame that did not come from his name or some far-fetched prophecy. He wasn't amazing at Wizard's Chess, Charms, Advanced Potions, or anything else, really (unless one counted being able to survive dark magic on a regular basis). His natural ability to fly well the moment he'd touched a broom had been the only skill that Harry really took pride in… So how was it fair that Tom Riddle had been instantly amazing at *that*, too?

But he *was.* The instructor showed them how to mount, how to properly take off—and Tom Riddle, who had lived in a muggle orphanage his entire life and could not have possibly ridden a broom before this moment, unlike many of his classmates, was a natural. He flew with an absurd ease, turning corners and controlling his speed so seamlessly that it looked like he had flown for years.

"You're *really* amazing, Tom!"

Harry listened with intrigue as a girl from Tom's house gushed the moment the young Slytherin Heir hit the ground. Riddle's face was

still pink from the wind, still smiling from that joyous, indescribable feeling of being airborne for the first time. The girl who spoke had been horrid at flying, choosing to remain on the grass with a few of her classmates. "You must have learned from someone. Did your father fly? Or an uncle, or something?"

Tom's expression darkened, his innocent grin faltering at her words. The girl, who had been grinning so zealously before, stepped away.

"No," he said without looking at her. "No one taught me."

There was a tense moment when the girls looked at each other, uneasily, as though waiting for one of the others to figure out the correct thing to say.

They were saved from coming up with something, though, for Mr. Carswell came bustling over. "Mr. Riddle!" he exclaimed, clapping Tom on the shoulder so forcibly he nearly fell over. "That was superb, best I've seen in years! And I've been doing this for… Good Lord." He paused, furrowing his thick, silvery brows. "…Over thirty years? Has it been that long?" He shook his head, sighing as he guided Tom away from the group of girls.

"I may be old, Mr. Riddle, but I'm not senile. You were incredible in the air, a real natural." The old man was speaking quietly, peering over his shoulder as if to make sure no one could hear him. "You know, I don't think I've ever said this to a first-year student, but… You should consider trying out for the Slytherin Quidditch team, son."

Tom peered up at him, one eyebrow raised. "Really?" he said, skeptical. "But there hasn't been a first-year player in…"

"Over fifty years," Mr. Carswell said, nodding. "A Hufflepuff boy, he played Beater. A muggle-born who had played some sport called *baseball* before he came to Hogwarts. Had a real knack for hitting things, I guess." The instructor shrugged, like he found this unimpressive. Tom visibly became more interested.

"But *you,* Mr. Riddle… You showed some real promise in the air today. Coordination, speed, control… even your landings were good. You could be a Chaser, no doubt in my mind."

"A Chaser…" Tom echoed, thoughtful.

"Yes sir, they're the real stars of the show. Though, I suppose the Seeker gets all of the fame for a few moments in the end… But trust

me, you don't want to play Seeker. They really get the worst of it. All alone during the entire game, getting reprimanded if they pay too much attention to what's going on… Living in the dark, basically, knowing that they're only supposed to focus on the one thing. And if they do it, and their team wins by the correct margin of points, then great! They're heroes. But if they *don't*…"

He shook his head, almost sympathetically. "If they *don't* manage to complete the one task, then it's like they've let their entire House down. All of the efforts of the Chasers, the Beaters, the Keeper—all of their labor is for nothing if the Seeker screws up, and trust me… they *know*. Being a Seeker is hard. They sacrifice a lot. That's why so few people try out for it and they tend to not last very long."

Mr. Carswell poked Tom in the chest then, the spark in his eyes swiftly returning. "Ah, but to be a *Chaser!* That's where all the glory and the action is; that's the position everyone wants. And hey, if your team *does* lose, well… you just blame the Seeker!" He laughed heartily, beaming. "So, if you need a note or something for tryouts since you're a first-year, let me know. I'd be happy to write one for you."

Tom looked at him for a long moment. "Thank you," he eventually said, his voice unemotional. "I shall… think about it."

The old wizard looked very smug, like he was so sure that Tom Riddle was about to become Hogwarts' finest Chaser. "You would be *great*, Mr. Riddle, I can feel it," he said, gripping Tom's shoulder and smiling confidently.

"*Great*."

The Quidditch pitch, the cloudy sky, the dark, inquisitive gaze of Tom Riddle…

All of it was deteriorating around him. Harry knew it was futile to try and hold on to the vision, but he tried nonetheless. Seconds later, however, and it was gone. The memory and the sinister wizard who had supplied it had both vanished entirely.

Except… no, *not* entirely. Voldemort was no longer touching him, that was true, and he had moved away so that their foreheads were no longer pressed together… But the suffocating blackness of his magic was still present.

Harry ran a hand through his hair, surprised to find that he was shaking. Voldemort was still with him in the cell, nearby, but…

But he couldn't know that Harry was *aware* that he was still there. Harry's mind raced, unsure of how to proceed. What should he do, being observed by the Dark Lord, when the Dark Lord himself thought that he watching his human horcrux unknowingly?

Unsure of why he was saying it, Harry just went ahead and verbalized the first thought that came to him.

"Seeking… and *living in the dark*…"

Harry laughed when he realized just how ridiculously poignant that old man's words were for his current circumstances. It was a cold, mirthless, sound.

"It *is* a hard role to play," Harry went on. "But I never tried out for my House. I never tried out… I was just sort of pushed into it, because there was no one else. Because they needed someone."

Tears, unexpected and unwanted, sprung to life in his sightless eyes. Harry buried his head in his knees, hiding his face from the voyeuristic entity that he knew was still there.

"I never wanted this," he whispered, now speaking only to himself.

"I never wanted this."

The blackness vanished. Harry wasn't sure if the certainty of solitude was reassuring or not.

An Altogether Different Game

Adrenaline could only keep Harry awake for so long.

His body was exhausted, and though he had managed to get one good night's rest when Narcissa had brought him a Dreamless Draught, it was not enough. Not long after the Dark Lord left him again, Harry fell into a fretful and disquieting slumber.

He dreamt in black and white.

Harry was in a cave…

The cave.

Only there was no Headmaster there with him, this time. Harry was alone on the island in the middle of a black and bottomless lake. The water's surface was as smooth as glass, dark, pristine, and currently undisturbed.

Harry turned towards the familiar stone basin. It was glowing faintly, colorless but bright. He approached it, peering warily over the rim, expecting to see it full of liquid with a fake locket in its depths…

He was very surprised, then, to find not a sickly potion or a necklace… but a *bird*.

A tiny thing, a canary. It sat in the bottom on the bowl and stared at him with shining, black eyes, its little head tilted to one side inquisitively.

But the most startling thing about the creature was that it, unlike the rest of his monotonous and sinister surroundings, was in *color*. The canary alone was a bright, vibrant gold-yellow, and it was its brilliantly hued feathers which emitted the light.

Harry gawked at it, confused. Maybe it was the way in which it shimmered, or maybe it was just because it was small and gold, and he *was* a Seeker at his very core, whether he'd chosen to be one or not… but Harry was overwhelmed with the urge to hold it.

He reached for the bird. It didn't move as he leaned forward, only sat there, unnervingly still…

The second Harry's fingers came into contact with what were

surprisingly warm feathers, the bird sprung to life.
It flew from the basin in a rush of flapping wings and high-pitched, desperate cries.

A moment later, it was gone. Its song of terror lingered in Harry's mind, panicked and unsettling…

A ripple.

The slight movement from the flat surface of the water drew Harry's eyes to it at once. The plane of perfect blackness became distorted as a *hand*—a human hand, a pale hand—a rotting, deteriorating *hand*—burst upwards, just a few feet away from the island's edge.

Harry yelped and backed away, but when he turned, he saw that another arm had shot out of the lake on the opposite side, and then another—he spun in a circle, but they were everywhere, now, animated corpses erupting from their watery prison, and there was no boat here, not even the illusion of the possibility of escape.

How and why were the Inferi attacking? He had not touched the water, he had not done anything to awaken them—Harry reached into his robe pocket, but he found that he did not have a wand.

The first corpse crawled onto the island with him. Harry looked upon the face of the undead man, and saw, with a thrill of horror—

Sirius.

Harry screamed.

His dead Godfather was ambling towards him, arms outstretched. Harry turned, only to see that the next body which had emerged from the lake was another man he recognized. Cedric Diggory, whose lifeless body he had once clung to, was moving towards him, though he was anything but alive.

All around him, the corpses of those he had lost advanced, dripping wet and moaning, stumbling towards him, eyes hollowed and the flesh rotting off their exposed bones. Alastor Moody, Remus Lupin, Lavender Brown, little Colin Creevey… *Neville Longbottom*… Harry was surrounded by them, his back pressed against the empty basin with no chance of escape; he was going to be dragged into the water by all those he had failed, who had sacrificed themselves for him…

And then he saw Ron.

Ronald Weasley came out of the water next, and Harry's terror was accompanied by the strangest, fiercest wave of denial.

"No!" he roared when he looked upon the deteriorating, deadened face of his best friend. "No, no, Ron, you're not dead, you're not—"

Surely he was imagining it, but Harry was certain he had seen a spark of life in those familiar, blue eyes that was not present in the others. Harry found himself shoving the other Inferi away from him, actually running *into* the lake to go towards him. His frantic, chaotic mind was forcing his feet towards Ron, like he wasn't actually dead, and if he could just get to him he could save him, somehow, make it so that it was not real—

But Harry couldn't make it far. The moment he was knee-deep in the icy water, the other corpses attacked, clawing at his clothes. There were too many to fend off, their water-logged bodies were too heavy —

"Ron!" he screamed, but he couldn't see anything other than a wall of rotting limbs and wet, putrid flesh. "Ron!" he yelled again, but his screams were drowned out by the guttural moans of the undead.

And then he was falling, being forced into the lake's depths. Harry's lungs filled with water, cold and horrible and suffocating—

"Wake up! Wake up!"

Harry woke with a scream on his lips.

The room was bathed in a vibrant, putrid yellow. He was writhing on the stone floor, thrashing and shoving something—some*one*—away from him. Hands landed on his shoulders, and though Harry jumped violently, the stranger's grasp was resolute, preventing him from scrambling away.

Harry took in a deep, shuddering breath. "It's okay," came Narcissa's voice, but her grip on his shoulders remained latched onto him, surprisingly strong. "You were just h-having a nightmare, child… You're okay…"

Harry nodded, breathing deeply and trying to slow his racing heart. A dream, he had been dreaming… He stopped trying to force her away, and Narcissa's hold relaxed. It was still extremely disorienting, to wake up to darkness…

Except, not quite darkness. The sickly tint of yellow-green was shifting, slipping back into a deep and calming blue…

"Is Ron okay?" Harry asked the moment he was able to speak. "Have they caught him, have you heard anything, about him or Hermione? Has—?"

"Shhh, calm down, child," Narcissa said. "I have not heard any news about the whereabouts of your friends. They are still missing. And I would know at once if either of them had been found… Trust me."

Harry nodded again. A rush of relief so powerful swept through him that he felt dizzy. He almost smiled then, too, as he realized the weight of her last words. He *did* trust Narcissa Malfoy, with her deep blue energy that washed over the cell. Strange, the way in which the hue changed. That yellow-ish tint had been laced with the bitter taste of fear and panic. Now, the air was flavored in a calm sort of navy serenity…

Very strange…

"I apologize," she murmured, pulling Harry towards her and holding him. He hadn't realized he was shaking until he was pressed against her much more composed form. "I should have brought you another Dreamless Draught. I was thinking to only bring one every other night or so, as they can be horribly addictive…"

Harry snorted involuntarily, feeling a bit loopy from the news that Ron and Hermione had not been caught. "All things considered, I think developing a dependency on Dreamless Draughts would be the least of my worries," he muttered, shifting so that he was sitting next to her more comfortably.

Narcissa laughed at that. "Fair enough," she admitted. “I'll bring them every night, then. That sounded like quite a nightmare you were having… I could hear you from the Dining Hall. I thought…"

The navy atmosphere was tinged a bit greener, again. Her voice trailed off, but Harry was able to finish her statement well enough in his head: *I thought the Dark Lord had appeared without warning to torture you.*

"Just… just a bad dream," Harry said hoarsely.

She didn’t say anything. Instead, Narcissa started running her fingers through his hair, an action she always seemed to do when she visited

him. Harry wondered if it was just because his hair was so messy, and she was used to such perfection in her life, such order. Harry remembered the few glimpses of Malfoy Manor, with its elegant furniture and dazzling chandeliers…and how she, her husband, and her son were all always so poised and sophisticated, not a hair out of place…

Well, Harry thought with a morbid sense of humor, she had met her match in his unruly locks. He doubted there was anything, magical or otherwise, that would make it lie flat.

But the action felt nice, so Harry certainly wasn't complaining. Strange, too, because Voldemort had done the same thing to him, more than once… But when the Dark Lord carded his cold, spidery finger through his hair, it was the creepiest, most unnerving gesture. Being touched by Voldemort made his skin crawl…

Except of course, when he was bringing forth that impossible light, tapping into the connection that they shared through the horcrux. Then it felt so welcoming, and weightless, so pleasant—so *good*—

Harry shook his head slightly. No, there was nothing *good* about being touched by Lord Voldemort—and any time he thought otherwise, it was just because of the fragment of his soul in him. It wasn't his fault, Harry told himself firmly, that he felt so consumed by it. It wasn't him.

It wasn't him.

Ah, but being touched by Narcissa was so different. Her hands in his hair and her arms around his shoulder made him feel warm and safe. Cared for, even.

He relaxed into her embrace. Eventually, his body stopped shaking, and his breathing slowed.

"Do you think you can eat anything? Are you hungry?" she asked after a time.

Harry shook his head. "No," he said, picturing nightmarish caves and rotting corpses. "I'm not hungry at all."

"Okay… But a few more days, and nutrition elixirs won't be enough to keep you well… They work in a pinch, but you're losing weight. You'll need real food, eventually…"

Harry didn't say anything. The thought of eating solid food made him feel surprisingly nauseas.

"What's your favorite food?" she asked, and the indigo tint in the air became a bit more violet… *interested.*

Harry pursed his lips as he thought about it. "I don't know," he admitted. "Maybe treacle tart? I pretty much loved everything they fed us at Hogwarts. I thought the welcoming feast was a joke, my first day there. I don't think I'd ever seen so much food in one place."

"Oh, I bet you're just like my son," Narcissa said, and the atmosphere became rosier still. "He can eat for *days*, and he stays a thin as a broomstick." She laughed, never ceasing in her affectionate, useless attempts at combing his hair.

"Pretty much," Harry agreed, thinking of how no matter how much he ate during the school year, he had always remained scrawny. "I think that's about it, though, when it comes to similarities between your son and me."

"Ah, not true," Narcissa said. "You're both competitive, aren't you? At least, that's how Draco always made it sound. Like you were his biggest rival in the entire world. I always heard about the Quidditch matches in the letters he would write. Two whole pages about every single thing that occurred that made it unfair that you won—beseeching his father to get someone at the Ministry to fire Madam Hooch, silly things like that. I remember when he first made Seeker, how he begged us to buy the entire Slytherin team new brooms—"

"Which you actually did," Harry interrupted, unable to stop himself.

But Narcissa just laughed good-naturedly. "I *know*, I'm terrible. I told him no at first, that that was ridiculous…but then he threatened to stay at Hogwarts for Christmas break that year. So I gave in. I hope you don't judge me too harshly for a being an enabling mother."

"Not at all," Harry said. "I still beat him in every match."

"Oh, yes, I know. I heard *all* about it."

"I hope you don't judge me too harshly for a superior Seeker."

Narcissa laughed again, and Harry thought he liked the sound of it, her laughter. He wished he could see her face. The most vivid memory he had of Narcissa's face was either terrified, from when he had seen

her in the cell, or like there was a bad smell under her nose, from when he had seen her outside of the current hell that was his life.

"See, that was why I never liked Quidditch when I was in school. It just consumed everyone who played or cared about it… One of my sisters played, but I never could understand what the appeal was. Balls and brooms and points, but at the end of the day, what did it matter?"

Harry normally would have argued passionately about just how much it mattered, how it mattered more than most classes, exams and possibly even the war, but he didn't. For the rosy and somewhat cheerful purple tone had turned a cold, deep blue at the mention of her sister.

Harry could only assume that she meant Andromeda Black, the sister who had married a muggle-born man and was subsequently burned off of the family tapestry…

"But not me," Narcissa went on. "I didn't care for sports. I was a choir girl."

"Were you?" Harry asked.

"Oh, yes. Professor Flitwick adored me. His one and only *Soubrette Soprano*, he called me. My voice was very high, I could hit any note." She paused, sighing wistfully. The aura around her was once more a pleasant, warm violet. "In my fourth year, I had a solo piece at the annual Yuletide festivities, the day before we all left for Christmas break. The Holly and the Ivy, have you ever heard it?"

"No, I haven't."

"It's a lovely song," she gushed. "I was so happy to sing it by myself, too. Lucius asked me to be his girlfriend that day. Years later, on the day he proposed to me, Lucius confessed that he knew he had to marry me when he heard me sing that day." The atmosphere of purple turned redder, rosier.

"…Will you sing it?"

Harry wasn't sure why he asked, but he suddenly wanted to hear it, this song which had inspired an actual, happy relationship.

"Oh, I haven't sang in *years*."

"All the more reason, then," Harry prodded. And without really

knowing how he knew, Harry could tell that she wanted to, and was just trying to act modest. "I'd love to hear it… If you don't mind."

She was quiet for a moment. Harry waited patiently as the silence stretched on, and then…

"*The holly and the ivy, when they are both full grown…*"

Narcissa's voice was high and clear; beautiful. Harry had his ear against her chest, the song vibrating against him… But what was really amazing was what was happening to her *magic*, as she sang…

"*Of all the trees that are in the wood, the holly bears the crown…*"

The violet saturation had turned completely pink… And then it transitioned into orange, bright and cheery, then yellow… It was a mesmeric rainbow, all melding and blending with her words; not actually visible, not really, but *tangible*, in his mind…

"*The rising of the sun, and the running of the deer…*"

Harry was stunned. Her voice, her magic, the lyrics of this mystical song…

"*The playing of the merry organ, sweet singing in the choir…*"

While Narcissa sang, Harry's world of shadows did not seem bleak at all.

But when she was gone…

Darkness.

Harry was alone in the cell, left with nothing but the ghost of Narcissa's voice and the promise that she would return with a Dreamless Draught before long. The absence of her calming aura, whether it was its typical navy or fluctuating with her emotions, made his cell feel far too desolate.

Harry's mind raced in the silence. This strange ability to sense… to *feel* the magic of people around him… it must have been his own magic responding to a crisis, a much more extreme version of bouncing when dropped or something…

It was fascinating. Harry wondered if everyone had their own flavor of magical energy. Probably, he mused, but it was hard to tell,

considering that the only people he'd be in contact with since being blinded were Narcissa Malfoy and the Dark Lord…

Voldemort, with his aura of deep blackness that made his own, blinded world of darkness seem bright in comparison. A force that was frigid when he was calm, but when he was angry became so dense and heavy that it was suffocating, so overwhelming that it made Harry sick to his stomach, repulsed…

Which was honestly where he wished it all ended, when it came to his…*relationship* with his prophesized enemy.

But it didn't.

That light, that brilliant light…

It was so warm and welcoming. And a part of it was definitely from the horcrux, that link was absolutely the reason such a shared sensation was possible in the first place, but…

But Harry thought he was starting to really figure out what was going on.

The light, the beautiful lure of it, the blindness, the memories…

And Lord Voldemort's oddly frequent appearances, considering just how *busy* he should be right now…

Just like that, as if on cue, Harry felt him.

Another stealthy, silent arrival. There was no creaking of the gate this time, no purposeful and ominous footsteps… Lord Voldemort was there in the cell with him, his dark presence emitting a cold, black shadow across his mind.

Harry hardly suppressed a smirk. He almost wanted to laugh, but he did not want to give away his newfound ability to sense people. If Voldemort thought he was completely blind and vulnerable, good. Harry wanted him to think that. The less the Dark Lord knew about Harry's power, the better.

Just one more power he'd *know not*…

Harry did smirk, then.

He wondered what Voldemort was thinking, standing there. Harry stayed perfectly still, sitting on the floor in the corner with his back

against the wall, and focused. He furrowed his brows, reaching, trying to discern where, exactly, the Dark Lord was…

When he put effort into it, he could sort of tell. The cloud of frigid blackness was thinner to the right, and… definitely denser, over there, towards the opposite corner… It felt like he was reaching with phantom hands, ghostly fingers that were trailing along the edge of a sheet of silk…

Oh.

He knew when he found him, precisely. It was like touching a block of solid ice. Harry gasped as he mentally skimmed the surface of the aura of the most powerful sorcerer of all time, withdrawing his force and shuddering.

Harry pulled the blanket around his shoulders. Had Voldemort felt that, too? If he had, the Dark Lord did not react at all—magically or otherwise. His energy remained static, completely still…

Ah. No, it hadn't. The blackness had…not lightened, no, but… something. It…shifted, somehow, became a bit more…active.

Curious.

Lord Voldemort was *curious*…

Oh, right. Because Harry had just recoiled and shuddered, like he was physically reacting to something. Which he was, but Lord Voldemort couldn't know that. To the Dark Lord, it must have looked like he had gasped and shuddered for no reason…

Harry bit his lip, pondering what to do next. Voldemort only stood there, watching.

Well, what the hell did he expect Harry to *do*? What did he think his prisoner did all day, down here in a cell, blind and alone?

Scowling, Harry decided to simply turn his back on his creepy, stalking captor. He rolled to his side, facing the wall and pulling the blanket up and over his head. *He can stare at my arse, then*, Harry thought bitterly.

Another tiny shift in that ocean of blackness.

Annoyed.

Harry hardly managed to bite back a laugh. *Annoyed?* Voldemort was insulted that his prisoner had turned his back on him? When Harry was blind and, as far as Voldemort knew, thought to be entirely alone?

But he was, Harry could feel it. The Dark Lord was irritated that Harry had turned away from him. Even though Harry supposedly did not know he was there.

Lunatic, Harry thought, feeling an odd combination of incredulous, nervous, and a bit amused.

He pretended to sleep, though such a thing was impossible. Still, he wasn't sure what else to do while being watched by such an unwanted audience.

A few minutes passed. Cold, dark, and tense.

Then, light.

The faintest pulse of that warmth. Harry physically didn't respond, but something deep in his very core lit up at the presence of it, a dormant part of his soul which instantly cried out:

Yes.

It grew. Harry still didn't move from his side, still kept his unseeing eyes closed… But the warmth was becoming brighter, closer… Voldemort was silently approaching him, and…

When cool, spidery finger grazed the back of his neck, Harry could feign sleep no longer. The weightlessness burst across his skin, made his nerve-endings flare to life with the heat of that energy despite the coldness of the Dark Lord's fingertips…

Involuntarily, Harry rolled onto his back, shifting closer to the source of buoyancy, that beautiful connection… His head softly brushed against something, was being guided to rest on a surface that was a bizarre mixture of cold and bright. It took Harry a moment to understand what was happening. His head was… was on the Dark Lord's lap, now, that must have been it, because that pulsating warmth was stronger than it ever had been before…

Then there were hands on either side of his face, tracing his jawline, outlining the contours of his cheekbones, his forehead, the lightning bolt scar… Studying him, learning every curve, every hardened line…

and Harry *saw*…

This strange entity, this inconceivable threat… No, not a threat, not anymore… A mystery, a puzzle, a complication he could not figure out how to rid himself of… Voldemort brushed his fingertips over the closed lids of the boy's eyes, thinking of those emerald irises which had haunted him for so long, threatening him with the promise of death which their hue so perfectly mimicked… but no longer… And that wholeness, that pureness… It was impossible, how captivating it was…such an irresistible lure, this virgin soul… He did not want to be so enthralled by it—but he *was*. He wanted to drink it in, to devour it and swallow it whole; he wanted that purity, *he wanted it*.

Harry was caught in the strangest of states, somewhere in between himself and the Dark Lord. The light and blackness were mingling in an outlandish way, fire and ice swirling together and making him dizzy. Voldemort's strange desire was escalating, making his dark energy grow, suffocating—but that beautiful warmth was rising too, and it was all so overwhelming. Harry's entire being was overstimulated, part of him craving that connection with the weightlessness and the bliss it provided, and another part recoiling from that sickening blackness, that cold, sick darkness that currently sang of obsessive want and need—

Some sound that was between a whimper and a moan escaped his lips when Voldemort dragged his fingers across both sides of his neck. Harry's back arched, his frazzled body unsure if it wanted less or more —and then he was seeing with a bright clarity, looking at himself through Voldemort's eyes again—

Harry saw his own lips part when he let out another desperate, panicked sound, and his unseeing eyes fluttered open, looking right at —

No.

No.

The moment was fleeting. A split second of vision, and then it was gone again, back to blindness. Harry closed his eyes, willing that to have just been his imagination, a trick—

He didn't have long to panic over it. The sinister, repulsive lust that was overwhelming him before dissipated, leaving nothing but pure, radiating light in its wake. Harry sighed, muscles relaxing in relief.

"A gift…"

The Dark Lord pressed his forehead to his human horcrux's again, so cool and yet so warm, and the plane of shadows disappeared.

…

…Hogwarts.

It was the Transfiguration room, in the middle of a class. First-years, it looked like. Only it was not Minerva McGonagall who stood at the front of the room lecturing…

It was Albus Dumbledore. And there, of course, was a young Tom Riddle.

The much younger, redheaded instructor smiled. "Match boxes are to your left," he said, pointing his wand towards a table. "You may each grab a match and begin."

Ah, yes. Harry remembered this. The very first practical test in which they were to turn a match into a needle and back again. Harry recalled his own experience with this. No one in his class had been able to make anything happen on that first day… Except Hermione, of course, who had made one end pointy and shiny, and been awarded house points for her prowess.

Tom was the first one to snatch up a boxy of matches. He didn't open it and share its contents with the rest of the class, just took the whole thing back to his desk. He pulled out a single match and sat it down. Then he stared at it.

Tom Riddle's dark eyes were intense, calculating. It was a look which Harry saw on Hermione often. Thinking, thinking, thinking…

Other students had already begun to fruitlessly wave their wands and mutter enchantments. Not Tom. For a full minute he only stood there, holding his wand still and staring at the match like it was the most complicated and deadly of objects, and could not be approached safely until he was quite certain he knew how to dispose of it.

Finally, Dumbledore ambled by. He looked at Tom with one eyebrow raised. The young Slytherin Heir was so focused on the match that he didn't seem to notice his Professor hovering over his shoulder.

"Well, Tom?" Dumbledore said softly, and Tom jumped like he'd been

shocked. "Give it a try."

Tom nodded, having never taken his eyes off of the match. A few of the students nearest to him paused to watch, already looking frustrated with their own failed attempts.

Tom pointed his wand, and with a very purposeful gesture and perfect pronunciation, muttered the incantation.

"*Mutare*."

The splinter of wood transformed before their eyes. Slowly, mimicking the way in which he had cast the spell, the match shifted and warped until before them sat a flawless, shining needle.

Tom snatched it up, beaming. "I did it," he breathed, dark eyes lit up in an almost manic pride. "A perfect needle."

The nearest students who had been watching gaped in awe. Tom turned to Dumbledore, who had an oddly flat look on his face.

"Very good, Tom," he said quietly. No smile, no lavish praise. "Now work on turning it back."

And then he walked away.

For a split second, Tom looked wounded—but his disappointment turned into a scowl the second Dumbledore had his back turned. He jammed the needle into the wood of the desk once Dumbledore was further away, and proceeded to look at it with a much more heated glare than he had when it was a match, like it had personally insulted him.

Tom did not once try to turn it back.

Harry watched the glowering young Dark Lord, and really, he found that he couldn't quite blame him. Dumbledore was much more amicable with the other students, whether Slytherin or Hufflepuff, grinning and giving advice and showering praise for such simple things as a good wrist movement. Harry got the impression that, had anyone else managed to make any progress at all, they would have been awarded points.

Soon, the chime which indicated the end of class sounded. Tom grabbed his bag and stormed from the room, leaving the needle sticking out of the desk like he wanted to make sure Dumbledore had

to remove it himself. He marched down the hall with a grimace on his face.

"Hey."

Three of the boys who had watched the interaction between Tom and their professor caught up to him. They were all from his house; Harry recognized them from the flying lesson. "We saw that, what happened. You transfigured your match on your first try. That was brilliant."

The other boys bobbed their heads in agreement. Harry could tell that they were not at all considered friends by the young Tom Riddle, but they were already in awe of him. "Yeah, that was worthy of fifteen points, at least."

The compliment had the opposite effect that the light-haired boy must have been hoping for. Tom's scowl deepened significantly, and the small blonde looked nervous.

"He's just biased, that ginger git," said another, a skinny brunette. "It's because he's Head of Gryffindor house. He hates all Slytherins on principle."

"No…" Tom said, ire in his voice. "It is *me* Professor Dumbledore does not like."

The other boys looked at each other anxiously. Harry was reminded of the last memory, in which the group of girls who had been praising his flying skills had done the exact same thing.

Bizarrely enough, they were saved from having to think of something to say by the same person. "Tom Riddle!"

Mr. Carswell, the flying instructor, came bustling down the hall. "Just the first-year I was looking for!" He stood next to Tom and smiled, then quickly glanced at the other students and frowned. "Mind if I steal your friend for a moment? Very good."

Before waiting for a response, Mr. Carswell put a hand on Tom's shoulder, and once more pulled him away for a private conversation.

"Slytherin Quidditch tryouts are tomorrow. I took a peek at the roster, and didn't see your name on the list. Are you still considering trying out? My offer still stands, I'll write you a letter, or anything else you might need…"

Tom blinked up at him in surprise, all traces of bitterness from the Transfiguration class vanished. "Oh. That. Yes, I did a lot of research on it, after we spoke. I'd never watched a Quidditch match before, you know, and I thought it would be unwise to try out for a sport which I'd never seen. So I went to the library and—" His eyes flashed in excitement at the mention of the library; again, it made Harry think of Hermione.

"Did you know that they keep memories on file of all the school matches? Oh, forgive me, what a stupid question. Of course you knew that, over forty of the memories there were yours, as you're the referee." Tom shook his head. He was speaking quickly, and went on before Mr. Carswell could say anything. "So I went to watch a few matches. And I was thinking of all that you said, and, well… I have come to the conclusion that I disagree. About the position of the Seeker, I mean."

Mr. Carswell cocked an eyebrow in surprise. "Oh?" he said, probably sensing that little prompt was necessary for Tom to go on.

"Yes," Tom replied, pointing a finger upwards and looking bizarrely academic for such a young student. "After watching several games, I really began to pick up on things. The Keepers, the Beaters, and the Chasers, of course… They're all in the thick of the action, as you've said, but…the Seekers are anything but dormant. Because they're really the *only* ones that matter. It has to be a bloodbath of a match if one team actually gets above one hundred and fifty points, and that almost never happens. So it really all comes down to the Seekers… and they're playing a game all of their own."

They turned a corner. Tom looked very serious as he spoke. "From what I can tell, the other players, with the giant quaffle, beating each other with sticks and being preoccupied with tiny hoops—they're all just *noise,* loud and flashy distractions to keep the crowds entertained… While the Seekers perform a much less visually entertaining but far more sophisticated task, where the only opponent they have is each other. They trick each other, mess with each other, are constantly watching where the other one is, what they're doing… each going after the same prize, knowing that only *one* can have it. The snitch, which will recognize the touch of whoever can captures it forever, due to flesh memory. Undeniable victory. And they play for it with stealth and speed and, above all…*cunning*."

Tom paused and looked up at Mr. Carswell with a smirk on his face. "To seek is to play an altogether different game."

Mr. Carswell looked dumbstruck. "Uh… Well, all right, then." He cleared his throat, probably confused that a first-year student had felt the need to *research Quidditch*, when he was practically being told he would make the team if he tried out… a guarantee that most first-years would *kill* for. "So, you're going to try out for Seeker, then?"

"Sorry?" Tom said, the sparkle of excitement fading from his eyes. "Oh, no. I'm not trying out at all."

"*What*?" Mr. Carswell looked even more confused. "After all that? After all your studying and—and research and whatnot?"

Tom laughed, adjusting the bag on his shoulder. "Goodness, no. It was interesting to learn about, but I looked at the practice schedule. Three times a week! For two hours at a time! Not to mention the actual matches, which can literally go on all day… When would I do homework? How would I find time to read ahead in class, write decent essays? When would I *study*? No, thank you. Besides, I've found a different extra-curricular activity with a much less demanding schedule and which I think shall be vastly more useful and interesting than Quidditch."

Tom grinned and nodded his head respectfully to an utterly flabbergasted Mr. Carswell. "Thank you for offering to write me a letter, but that won't be necessary. Have a lovely day, sir."

Then he turned and walked away, just like that. The flying instructor watched him go several paces before he finally regained the ability to speak.

"Well—wait, Tom!" he called, and Tom looked over his shoulder. "If not Quidditch, then *what*?"

Harry was glad he'd asked, for he'd been thinking the same thing. What could possibly be more interesting than Quidditch?

In response to this, Tom did the strangest thing. He turned on the spot, slowly, and in one fluid, purposeful movement… he bowed.

Mr. Carswell stared at him. He must have reached his threshold for being confused, because he didn't say anything, only looked at him with his mouth hanging open and shaking his head.

Tom sighed deeply and stood up straight when he could tell that the old wizard just didn't get it.

"I'm joining the *Dueling Club*, of course," Tom said, and the glimmer of eagerness was back in full force, shining in his eyes. He smiled when Mr. Carswell continued to look baffled that anyone would willingly ever choose *dueling* over *Quidditch*.

Tom laughed. "I've no time for quaffles, sir!" he called over his shoulder. He headed down the hall, away from the stunned old man. The Slytherin Heir's young face twisted into a grin that was anything but cheerful as he descended the staircase, heading down into the dungeons where Harry knew his common room to be. The next words he spoke were murmured quietly to himself. Like a quiet vow, like a prayer.

"I want to play an altogether different game."

Fearful and Fearless

Days passed.

Harry was alone the majority of the time, shrouded in darkness. His world was quiet, bleak, and cold.

When he was feeling particularly hopeless or on the verge of a mental breakdown, he would practice Occlumency. And while he wasn't sure if he was getting any better or not—as Voldemort had not, for unknown, miraculous reasons, tried to shred his mind apart again—it *did* stop him from dwelling on the welfare of his friends.

Life was perfectly miserable, and Harry wondered how long he would be forced to endure it.

…Though it was not *entirely* horrible *all* of the time. If there was one thing that Harry Potter was certain of in the current predicament that was his captivity, it was this:

He adored Narcissa Malfoy.

She had taken to visiting him more often, and staying for longer periods of time when she did. She would bring him nutrition elixirs twice a day, always followed up with Sugar Crystals (which she admitted to doing a bit selfishly, as she said it gave her a good excuse to have one too) and had even managed to get him to ingest some solid food by bringing him treacle tart.

Narcissa Malfoy had personally hand-fed Harry some of his favorite dessert, and it was better even than what he recalled from Hogwarts (she admitted to having not made it herself, but instead purchased it from a bakery in Hogsmeade. Harry had adamantly promised not to judge her). Harry had only been able to eat about three bites, but still. Progress.

And then, every evening, Narcissa always brought him a Dreamless Draught. The beautiful woman would give him a healthy dose, and as Harry was drifting off into slumber she would sing something soft and sweet, making her magical aura swirl about in the most magnificent way. Harry would fall asleep with a smile on his lips, and he couldn't help but wonder, if he somehow made it out of this war alive, well, and victorious, just how he was going to break it to Draco that he was stealing his mother.

The added benefit to this ritual of Dreamless Draughts and bedtime songs, besides the wondrous ability to sleep well and without nightmares, was that he always knew when it was night. Harry could now accurately keep track of how long he had been a prisoner in Malfoy Manor. The first few days were a blur, so he wasn't *exactly* sure, but Harry was certain now that he had been in this dungeon for at least a week. Over seven days of gloom, punctuated only by the occasional sweet and kind embrace of a concerned woman.

Yes, Narcissa Malfoy was the solitary light in Harry's dark, dark life.

…And then there was Voldemort.

The Dark Lord was… complicated.

Voldemort came to visit Harry with a distressing frequency, one which only seemed to be increasing with time. But what was truly unsettling was the way in which he did so.

Sometimes, the Dark Lord would appear in a most disquieting, silent manner, standing in the corner of the cell and just… *being*. He would not announce his presence in any way. Harry knew that he believed he was being stealthy—that Voldemort thought that Harry did not know he was there—but Harry *did* know, and it never failed to scare the hell out of him when the Dark Lord would show up like that. Voldemort was like an unwanted, evil spirit haunting his life, clinging to the stone walls of the cell and filling the space with his black, sickening aura.

These quiet visits would sometimes last only a few moments, but often they would stretch on for unbearable amounts of time. Harry was decent enough at *pretending* like he didn't know the Dark Lord was there, at least. He would usually feign sleep and face the wall. But the entire time, Harry would feel Voldemort's eyes burning holes into his back, a cacophony of conflicting, unpleasant emotions simmering on the outskirts of his mind.

The visits where the Dark Lord *did* interact with him were even more complex. Three things would always happen. The first was the initial, suspended moment of anticipation. It never failed that, on the occasions where the Dark Lord entered with the ominous creaking of the gate and audible footsteps, that once he was in the cell with Harry, he would wait. *Always*. Voldemort would stand there, knowing that Harry *knew* it was him, just a few feet away, and say *nothing*. Were it not for Harry's newfound ability to sense magic and

fluctuating emotions, this would have driven him absolutely *mad.*

…However.

Harry was getting better and better at his miraculous new skill. Perhaps it was because of his isolation; perhaps it was his own magic's desperation for survival. Whatever the case, he was becoming quite good at being able to divine just what each shift in hue meant, what each flavor of energy represented. And so when Voldemort came into Harry's cell, revealing his company through sinister, non-verbal sounds, Harry may not have been able to glean his precise thoughts… but he could tell what he was *feeling.*

First, anticipation. A sort of great, impatient expectation, bordering on excitement. When Harry would continue to do nothing, this eagerness would shift to something a bit more hostile. *Annoyance.* A few more minutes of a stoic, quiet prisoner, and Voldemort became frustrated. A fierce irritation that was laced with confusion. And Harry knew *exactly* why this was the case.

Every time the Dark Lord knowingly revealed himself to his poor, blind captive, he expected Harry to *beg.*

Voldemort was just *waiting* for his prisoner to break, to fall apart completely and beg, beg, *beg* for his sight back, *beg* for his freedom, for his friend's safety, for anything and everything. He was waiting for the moment that Harry would crawl on his hands and knees and swear that he would do anything the Dark Lord wanted, anything at all, if he could just see again, if he could just get out of the cold, darkness of this cell. And maybe, if Harry did not know that this was precisely what Voldemort was so eagerly waiting for, this might have happened already.

…However.

Harry *did* know this was what the Dark Lord was waiting for, and so whenever Voldemort showed up with that sadistic excitement permeating the air, it was more than enough to cement Harry in his decision to never, ever give him that satisfaction.

Voldemort would wait, Harry would sit there, and Voldemort would become extraordinarily pissed off.

Not the Dark Lord knew that *Harry* knew he was angry, of course. Voldemort never said anything in those torturously long minutes of anticipation, but Harry could feel his fury like frothing, dry ice. Cold,

Voldemort's aura was *always* cold, but it was the kind of frigidity that could burn straight through skin and bone.

Eventually, though, this icy rage would diminish, and following was a much smaller version of the initial hope that Voldemort had felt upon entering the cell. Like the Dark Lord was thinking, *Next time.*

After this very non-traditional sort of greeting in which neither of them said a single thing, they would commence into phase two of the Dark Lord's more invasive visits:

That beautiful, beautiful light.

Voldemort would reach out to his human horcrux with that mesmerizing weightlessness, and… well. Things always got confusing, then.

Sometimes it would remain relatively innocent, as the Dark Lord seemed able to practice some self-control. The welcoming light would stay to a minimum, and it was just pleasant, pulsating warmth that made Harry feel like he was floating on air.

It felt… good, when it was like that. *Disturbingly* good.

(But it was just the horcrux, it was just the stupid horcrux, and it wasn't Harry's fault that he was unable to stop himself from leaning into the murderer's touch, from sighing in bliss, from enjoying it, because he *didn't* enjoy it, no, no, no.)

Other times, Voldemort's mind would unhinge in the presence of that pure, captivating connection, and Harry's world would fracture and fall apart. The light would become too bright, too enthralling, too *everything*. Voldemort's dark energy would rise up like a tidal wave, all catastrophic *want* and *need*. It was devastating, and each time the Dark Lord's control slipped, it got worse. Harry would feel like he was going to be ripped apart from the inside out—half of him clinging to that seductive light while the other half of him tried desperately to retract, repulsed by Voldemort's own aura of blackness.

It was similar to the presence of a dementor, Harry realized the last time this had occurred. Voldemort's dark magical signature was that sort of awful, only it served to inspire fear rather than drain happiness.

The two sensations in tandem—that blissful, light warmth, and that disturbing, dark chill—were far too overwhelming. Harry's instincts

would demand of him polar opposite reactions, desire and repulsion fighting for prominence, and his overstimulated body would twist, tremble and ache—

The only reprieve was Voldemort.

In those suffocating moments, trapped between lust and loathing, Harry could find solace solely in the Dark Lord's mind. And he would *see.* Harry would experience the world though Voldemort's eyes; he would look down at his own gasping, shaking body and feel the Dark Lord's emotions—which were always just so wonderfully and horribly conflicted.

For being a dark wizard who claimed to be so detached, Lord Voldemort certainly had a lot of *feelings*.

Harry could hardly keep them straight, the Dark Lord's emotions were such a mess. There was hatred, of course. A very unique, burning kind of hatred that Harry liked to think Lord Voldemort harbored solely for him, his unfortunate human horcrux. Yet right alongside that charming hatred were confusion, irritation, desperation, want, need, *lust—*

(But it was just the horcrux, it was just the stupid horcrux, and it wasn't really Voldemort that was feeling such an inexplicable and unfathomable desire for Harry Potter, who wanted to touch his skin and bring forth that intoxicating light because he enjoyed it, because he *didn't* enjoy it, no, no, no.)

It was lust for power, for control… Obviously.

Obviously.

Either way, those insights into Voldemort's psyche always seemed to do the trick. The moment the Dark Lord realized that his thoughts were no longer entirely private, the waves of sickening need would fall away, and Harry would be banished from Voldemort's mind. Only the innocent, beautiful light would remain, and Harry could breathe again. Then, and only then, would Voldemort finally speak.

Which would lead them to the third and final phase of their stressful interactions:

'*A gift…*'

A memory.

Twice, sometimes three times a day, Voldemort would visit in this manner and bestow upon Harry the gift of a memory… of Tom Riddle.

Often, they were seemingly harmless and without any sort of grand, hidden meaning. Memories of Tom Riddle performing some extraordinary spell on his first try. Tom Riddle being charming and witty and admired by every single student within the castle. Tom Riddle being praised up and down by all of his professors for his amazing intellect and skill.

…All of the professors except Albus Dumbledore.

There were a number of memories which showed Dumbledore passing Tom by when he was performing incredibly well in class, of the former Transfiguration Professor looking the other way when Tom had his hand raised or was otherwise trying to get his attention. Sometimes, Harry wondered if Voldemort was making those memories up. For Dumbledore seemed to treat Tom Riddle… Well, he wouldn't say as badly as *Snape* had treated *him,* because such a thing would be impossible, but… just unfairly, he supposed. And these were in Tom's earlier years, too—long before any students were petrified or murdered due to the Chamber being opened.

Of course, Dumbledore had already known that Tom was a parselmouth, and therefore the descendent of Salazar Slytherin… but still. It seemed… wrong.

Half of the visions were just that, though. Simple and clean. Tom Riddle being a normal kid, really. A ridiculously gifted and intelligent child, no doubt… But a kid, regardless.

Other memories would be far more insightful.

The last vision which Voldemort had shown him was one of these. It had struck Harry quite powerfully, making his mind reel in the aftermath when, once the memory had faded, the Dark Lord too had vanished. Because he was always gone then. Harry would still be a bit high on whatever warmth and light lingered from their connection when, by the time he had come crashing back down to earth again, Voldemort was no longer with him.

The last memory was of a boggart.

Tom must have been in his third year, for it was the lesson in which their Defense teacher, Professor Merrythought, had told them that they would be facing their worst fear. The most impacting part of the

memory—for Harry, at least—was that Tom Riddle, just like every other student in that class, had looked genuinely afraid.

Oh, he was much better at hiding his anxiety than the other children, that was true. But Harry had spent enough time with Dumbledore analyzing the face and history of Tom Riddle to pick up on it. The way his fists clenched, the way he worked the muscle in his jaw. Tom was good at pretending, but the young Heir of Slytherin had been *afraid.*

The girl that stood in line before him had been terrified of werewolves. The boggart was howling, rearing its feet and barring its claws, when—

'*Riddikulus!*'

Bang, and suddenly the werewolf was wearing a hot pink tutu, and the whole class laughed…

Tom had stepped forward confidently, wand held high and chin raised. But Harry could see it. In the depths of those midnight irises, in the twitch of his fingers.

Fear.

The boggart was covering its canine ears when it looked at Tom, trying to drown out the laughter of the class, and then… nothing.

It stared at the dark haired child, its currently amber eyes lit up in confusion, and did not turn into anything at all. It stumbled and fell, rolling to its side in the same, bright pink tutu, looking far more afraid than Tom had. The laughter died, and the boggart started screaming in a way that Harry was sure real werewolves *never* did.

That was when Professor Merrythought had stepped in. The boggart turned into a ghoul before she banished it back into its crate.

Everyone looked shocked. Tom too appeared perplexed. His lips parted in confusion, unable to voice his concern. Professor Merrythought's face had turned a stark white, her voice hardly a whisper as she addressed the future Dark Lord.

"…Do you fear *nothing,* Mr. Riddle?"

Silence. The entire class was slack-jawed, staring at Tom in amazement. Tom only looked stunned for a second before his face slipped into a seamless, *believable* smile.

"That's right," he said quietly, and the professor dropped her wand.

"I fear *nothing*."

But Harry knew that was a lie.

Lord Voldemort feared death, he had always feared death above all else… But death didn't have a face, and so the boggart had not known what to turn into. Harry was sure that, if the young Tom Riddle had associated death with an image, like the grim reaper or something, that's what it would have been. But that icon of a black cloak and silver scythe was a *muggle* imagination, so Tom surely wouldn't have thought of that. And boggarts aren't very smart, so it probably just couldn't come up with anything when its victim had no reference.

Voldemort must have thought that impressive, to show Harry the memory of a supposedly fearless Tom Riddle. But the Dark Lord was wrong.

Harry *did,* however*,* think about it for a long time once he was alone again in his cell. The image of a frightened boy distracted him from his attempts at Occlumency, flickering in his mind like an irritating, unwanted fly which he could not swat.

Empty your mind…

A deep breath in, a deep breath out…

Tom Riddle, young but subtly afraid.

Empty your mind…

A deep breath in, a deep breath out…

Tom Riddle, waiting for the manifestation of death, jaw clenched and eyes blazing—

Empty your mind…

Harry couldn't.

Sighing deeply, he gave up on trying to practice any complicated, mental magic. Harry curled up on his side, pulling the enchanted blanket up over his head completely, and allowed his mind to drift. Something about a scared child who had possibly convinced even himself that he was fearless bothered him immensely.

Harry's head hurt. He felt weak, weaker than he ever had before in his life. Standing made him dizzy. He knew that what Narcissa had said was right—he was losing weight, and nutrition elixirs and Dreamless Draughts were no substitute for real health. He was a human; he needed exercise and sunshine and *people*.

Harry wondered how long Voldemort was willing to let this go on once he realized that his captive would never break. Harry would never beg the Dark Lord for anything.

Never.

And if he wasted away in here, then fine. Harry would die, and the Dark Lord would be mortal once more.

For the first time in days, Harry drifted off to sleep before Narcissa could arrive with a draught and a lullaby. Harry fell into slumber while wondering if Death had a face, and if, when his time came, he would be brave enough to greet it like an old friend.

Harry awoke with a shudder and a gasp.

If he had been dreaming, he couldn't recall what it was about. He only knew that his heart was racing, beating hard against his chest, and that he was shaking, panting—the world was black and cold and someone was gripping his wrist—

"Be still."

Not Narcissa.

Before Harry had the chance to be properly horrified at waking up to the Dark Lord again, the buoyant, inviting warmth danced across his skin. His confusion and fear were swept away with the ease of one brushing away a cob web, and he couldn't help it—Harry sighed in relief.

Voldemort's grip loosened. Even though Harry was no longer quivering without whatever nightmare he'd been having, the motion made him anxious. In that instant when the Dark Lord let go of his wrist, before the light could fade, Harry's entire being consisted of nothing but an all-consuming *panic*.

"Don't," he gasped, the crushing dread making him forget everything else. Harry reached forward and gripped the Dark Lord's chest,

clinging to the front of his robes like his life depended on it. But he wasn't thinking 'Dark Lord' or 'mass murderer' or 'prophesized enemy'; Harry wasn't thinking anything at all except:

"Don't leave me."

Harry buried his head into the Dark Lord's neck, and his forehead against Voldemort's cool, exposed skin made the brilliant light explode on contact.

It was far more overwhelming than it had ever been before. It was beautiful, it was stifling, it was so *perfect* and he wanted it, now, now, *now—*

A crushing weight of blackness struck Harry like a cannonball to the chest.

Voldemort's possessiveness, cutting across the brightness of that light like an eclipse. The Dark Lord trailed one hand up Harry's back until he was wrapping his fingers around his neck. The additional touch of their bare skin made everything escalate—more light, more warmth, more disturbing, sickening desire—

Harry was sure he was going to be torn apart. "S… Stop," he gasped, but Voldemort's fingers were digging into the delicate skin of his throat, persistent, and so Harry did the only thing he could. He personally reached out through their convoluted bond, and Harry found himself in the Dark Lord's mind.

There was nothing confusing about it this time.

Desire.

Passionate, ardent want. That was the singular thought that made up the Dark Lord's world as he looked down at a gasping, hyperventilating Harry Potter.

I want.

You're killing me, Harry thought, desperately hoping that Voldemort would hear him over his own rabid, mental voice. *You're killing me, you're—*

Harry just caught the tail-end flicker of some emotion resembling comprehension before he was thrust from Voldemort's mind. When he breathed in through his own lungs, it was to find that the suffocating,

horrendous blackness of the Dark Lord's desire was gone.

Harry sighed. Only the warmth remained, light and innocent. His body relaxed into Voldemort's arms, panting like he had just run a great distance.

Maybe some part of him was sure that he would, later, be incredibly distressed that he had told the Dark Lord not to leave him. For he had sworn to himself that he would never beg Voldemort for anything, ever… but…

That request was surely one that neither party had expected. Harry had been momentarily vulnerable upon waking up, clinging to anything to make whatever already forgotten nightmare he'd had go away.

And Lord Voldemort…

Well, Harry could not be bothered to think of it, now. He was blissfully thinking of nothing at all as the revolting blackness that was Voldemort's broken, desperate soul had faded, floating solely in the warmth that was the bond between them. Because Harry understood that's what it was, at this point.

There was Harry's soul, pure and untouched by darkness.

There was the horcrux, somehow a part of him, which connected him with the Dark Lord in an unfathomable way…

And then there was what was left of the Dark Lord. Broken, tainted by murder, evilness, and horrid rage… and the antithesis of everything that Harry was.

The in-between of their souls was pleasant all round. Harry felt like he was defying gravity with the buoyancy of it, when that warmth seeped under his skin and he felt a certain wholeness that he had never even known he'd been missing before.

And when Voldemort reached further, pulled and demanded more, the sensation of Harry's unbroken soul to the Dark Lord was just… *miraculous*.

Yet the absolute opposite was true for Harry. Feeling Voldemort's shattered core was nothing short of horrific. It disgusted him on the deepest, most intimate level.

But the in-between…

Completely unsure of why he was even doing it, Harry reached with both hands, searching, blindly, for the Dark Lord's face. Just as he had done once before…

He never got there.

In a rapid movement, Voldemort unceremoniously forced Harry off of him, shoving him onto the hard, stone floor. The blissful light vanished. Harry felt like he had just been dropped into an ocean of ice water at the loss of it.

There was a long moment of silence. Harry's lucidity returned to him quickly enough, and he pushed himself into a seated position. He took in the familiar yet absolutely frazzled aura of the Dark Lord's magic from the opposite side of the cell.

Voldemort's emotions were running rampant, making his typical blackness shift into very dark but perceptible shades of… red, maybe. A deep, frustrated crimson outlining the vast shadow of his usual magic.

Harry, still feeling breathless, tried to decipher it. That emotion, that sensation, it was… it was…

Ah.

Harry opened his eyes, and even though he couldn't see, he knew that he was looking straight at the Dark Lord when he spoke. That his sightless, cursed eyes were fixed on Voldemort's.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," Harry said, his voice raspy and low. "…Longing for that feeling. For wanting to be whole."

The deep, ruby hue intensified. Voldemort's aura was as un-black as it had ever been. Not warm by any means, but a tiny bit less icy.

Harry recognized that emotion, too.

"Nor embarrassed about," he went on, as Voldemort remained silent. "I… I understand."

And he *did* understand. Harry had felt Voldemort's own soul firsthand. He couldn't even fathom what it must be like, to exist like that all the time. To be eternally so broken. Not that he hadn't done it to himself,

but still. The thought of living in such a fragile state filled Harry with pity, despite everything.

"I'm sorry you've lost that," he whispered, envisioning a frightened boy awaiting his boggart, only to be met with the delusion that he was fearless. And it was quite possibly the most raw, honest thing that Harry Potter had ever uttered out loud.

"I'm sorry that you became this. I'm sorry that you never knew love… I'm sorry."

Harry buried his face into his hands. He braced himself for what he was sure was going to be a furious reaction from the Dark Lord.

Nothing happened.

Voldemort disappeared. Harry felt his absence like a veil being lifted.

"…I'm sorry," he murmured again, long after the Dark Lord had gone. But he had no idea for what or to whom he was apologizing.

Aurora Borealis

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Voldemort was strangely absent after that.

At least, in comparison to how frequently the Dark Lord *had* been stalking his human horcrux until then. An entire day followed in which Harry was not exposed to the unnerving, silent presence of Voldemort looming in the corner of his cell, nor any confrontations in which Voldemort announced himself through the creaking of the gate and slow, ominous footsteps.

Which meant no memories, either.

Harry's monotonous imprisonment was disrupted solely by visits from Narcissa Malfoy. Maybe it was only because Harry had finally had some distance from the sickly aura of Voldemort, but when she asked him to try eating more that day, Harry was able to. It was only bread, and he was still forced to take a nutrition elixir as well, but it was something. Narcissa gave him two sugar crystals afterwards.

They still hadn't caught Ron and Hermione.

Harry was almost disbelieving on that account. Over a week, and his two best friends had gone undetected from the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters, who were now openly and *publicly* hunting them down. Harry imagined the two of them out in the woods, camping without him. He wondered if they were miserable, worried about what had become of him and not knowing what to do or how to move forward. The conclusion he came to wasn't exactly a difficult one to reach.

Harry groaned, pulling the enchanted blanket around his shoulders and slumping against the wall. He hated to admit it, but he was actually feeling a bit… *bored.*

Of course he was panicked, of course he was afraid. But with his day no longer being punctuated by random intrusions from the Dark Lord —whether he announced his presence or not—Harry found himself with very little to keep his mind occupied.

He longed for vision, for *light.*

Harry's anticipation for Narcissa's evening visit was particularly high. She'd bring another Dreamless Draught then, and, far more importantly, she would sing.

Narcissa's magic when she sang to him was nearly as beautiful as real light. More so, in some respects. It was fluctuating colors that danced in his mind's eye—gorgeous, kaleidoscopic scenes that he knew would be impossible to translate into actual sight. After a whole day of nothing but darkness, Harry had never looked forward to anything more.

As if the thought had summoned her, Harry felt the tranquil sensation of her presence—a calm, navy resonance. Harry smiled.

"Hello, child."

Narcissa entered the cell with measured footsteps and a friendly tone. She knelt at Harry's side as she usually did. "Do you think you can eat any more today?"

Harry thought for a moment before shaking his head. He didn't feel nauseous, but he also didn't want to push his luck after successfully keeping down some bread earlier. "I don't think I should," he murmured.

"That's fine. Here, I have water for you. And since you took an elixir earlier I won't make you take one now."

"So no sweets then, either?"

Narcissa laughed softly, and her aura warmed. "I never said that."

Harry felt the goblet of water being pressed into his hands. He took it and quickly drank it all.

"Will you sing something?"

The question rushed out of Harry's mouth before he could stop it. He was just looking forward to the sensation of her swirling magic too much to contain himself. He felt her mood flicker with an emotion similar to embarrassment, but then instantly swell into something bright and positive, rose-gold interwoven with blue.

Flattered. Narcissa Malfoy was deeply *flattered.*

"What would you have me sing?" she asked, taking the empty cup

from him.

Harry was too preoccupied with the buoyant display of her emotion to come up with anything. "Whatever you like," he said. Then, thinking on the spot, "Your favorite song. What is your favorite song?"

It suddenly seemed the most important thing in the world, knowing what Narcissa Malfoy's favorite song was. Harry could sense her mood brimming with an immediate, happy nostalgia, could hear her inhale a breath as she was about to answer—

"*Nothing.*"

Both Narcissa and Harry started violently at the sound of Voldemort's voice from the far side of the cell.

Cold, soft, and icy. It was the slightest whisper that nonetheless cut across the air like a blade, slicing the warm atmosphere in half and filling it with blackness.

Narcissa's own aura became a stricken and frightened tone. Harry heard her scramble away at the same time that something clattered to the floor; she must have dropped her wand. "M-m-my L-lord," she stuttered, her voice high. "I-I-I d-didn't s-see—"

"Leave us."

Narcissa immediately obeyed her Lord's command in a panic. Without another word, Harry heard her dash away. Quick, light steps and the rapid swinging of the cell gate opening and closing. The fearful blue-tinge vanished with her, leaving nothing but the Dark Lord and his incensed blackness behind.

Harry wet his lips, pushing himself further into the wall like he might be able to disappear into the stones. He knew then, without a doubt, that his pleasant visits filled with sugar and songs had come to an end.

Voldemort's magic was dark, sour, and… *sharp*. So much so that Harry could actually taste it on the back of his tongue, filling his mouth with its bitterness—worse than any potion or elixir. Tempestuous, as well; Voldemort's aura kept flickering from one horrid feeling to the next, as if the Dark Lord was experiencing an internal crisis that he was struggling to control.

Harry's head was spinning at the onslaught of it. Voldemort was *ridiculously* emotional on the inside, no matter what kind of cold

façade he showed the rest of the world. But before Harry could figure out just what each of those chaotic emotions were, the whirlwind of bitterness faded… replaced by that heavenly light.

Harry hadn't been prepared for it. It was such a sudden switch from nastiness to bliss that he gasped, all thoughts or concerns for Narcissa gone in an instant.

Was it simply because it had been so long since he'd experienced it? Or was it just getting…*better*, as time went on? Harry wasn't sure; he only knew that when Voldemort tapped into the strange link which connected their souls, it felt warmer and more potent than ever before. There was no feverish, nauseating desire coming from the Dark Lord this time, either. It was just light, pure and lovely. Harry wanted to sink into the warmth.

It got stronger when Voldemort approached him. Harry couldn't hear the Dark Lord in his silent, phantom-like movements, as he chose not to move with purpose, but he felt the proximity of him as he drew nearer. By the time Voldemort was kneeling in front of him, in the same spot Narcissa had been in moments before, it was all Harry could do to not lean into him, towards that alluring light.

Physically cold fingers grazed his neck, trailing across his jawline. Harry's breath hitched at the odd combination of frigid skin and mental warmth. When he touched his forehead to Harry's, the brightness increased, but still no twisted, wanton blackness accompanied it. The Dark Lord was practicing exceptional self-control.

For a suspended moment they stayed like that, completely still as the most powerful and dangerous wizard of all time cradled Harry's face in his hands. The dismal cell vanished. The darkness dissipated. The entire world was an impossible sea of pure, peaceful light.

"…A gift."

A silvery brightness wrapped itself around Harry's mind, and he fell into a memory.

Immediately, Harry was thrown off guard… because they were, for once, not in Hogwarts.With the exception of the first memory, in which a young Tom Riddle had trekked through the autumn woods, Voldemort had only shared with Harry recollections of his school days. They had also generally showed a Tom Riddle who was young and looked relatively harmless. A child.

Neither of these consistencies rang true, now. Harry found himself in a snow-covered forest in the dead of night. Yet despite this, it was not dark, for several reasons.

The first, and most mesmerizing, was the sky.

It was littered not only with stars, but with a fluctuating display of colors so vibrant and otherworldly that Harry wondered if this was, perhaps, a memory of a dream. He stared in awe as the veil of hues transitioned from a pastel lilac to an icy blue, only to quickly turn an emerald green, then blue again…

It was breathtakingly beautiful.

The second reason for the lack of darkness was the ring of brightly burning, bluebell flames dancing along the ground. Harry recognized them as the same ones which Hermione was so proficient at producing, only these were not contained in glass jars. They hovered independently, burning in a controlled manner without barriers.

And there, in the center of that ring of cobalt fire, was Tom Riddle.

Harry almost jumped in shock at the sight of him, because he was so strikingly different from the previous memories. He was older. Much older. Nothing near the monster he had become, no, but certainly not a child. In his twenties, perhaps? It was a bit difficult to tell. He looked similar to when Harry had witnessed him visiting Hephzibah Smith, when he had discovered the locket and the cup.

Yet another reason he looked so different was his attire. This Tom Riddle was not wearing school robes—or wizarding robes at all, for that matter. He was wearing tall boots, *jeans*, a long, black coat, and a thick, green scarf with a matching hat pulled down over his ears. To complete this picture of uncharacteristic casualness was the way he was just *lying* there… literally.

Tom Riddle was on his back in the snow, seemingly unaffected by what must have been a very cold climate. He had his hands behind his head, watching the display of lights with wonder-filled eyes and a slight smile on his lips.

Harry was hesitant about sitting with him, despite the fact that it was a memory and he was invisible. Feeling strangely uncomfortable about it, he did. Harry sat a safe distance away, on the outside of Tom's circle of bluebell flames. He pulled his knees to his chest and watched the sky.

"…I have come to the conclusion, my friend, that it really is the muggles which are the problem."

Harry jumped so badly that, had he still been standing, he was sure he would have fallen over. He looked at Tom with his jaw hanging open. Had Tom Riddle just *talked* to him?

But… he wasn't looking at Harry. Tom's gaze remained on the sky. "It's the truth, pure and simple. The muggles are destroying this world."

Tom sighed deeply. Harry was floored. This was a memory, and Tom Riddle was… He was just laying here, speaking out loud…

"Talking to yourself… Isn't that a sign of insanity?" Harry muttered. He then recognized that he, too, was technically talking to himself by asking that. He was in a memory. This Tom Riddle could not hear him.

"Perhaps they would not be so detrimental, if only there were not so many of them. There are just far too many muggles on this planet. Don't you agree?"

"He speaksss…"

Harry jumped again at the second, obviously different voice. He looked around wildly, but he saw no one else with them… And it had sounded like it was coming from right next to Tom, too, but he was by himself, on the snow…

Oh.

Harry laughed out loud when he spotted the snake. Or, at least, what he could see of the snake. A tiny serpent was wrapped somehow around Tom's shoulders and chest, with only its little, brown head sticking out of his collar, right above the green scarf. The rest of its body was concealed under Tom's clothes.

And though 'he speaks' seemed a very strange response to Tom's question, Tom just kept going like that was perfectly normal. "They are, and they know it, too. The muggles are very aware that they are overpopulating the earth, destroying it with their pollution… I was listening to a muggle radio broadcast recently—I *know,* how *embarrassing—promise* me you won't tell anyone—and this muggle environmentalist was going on and on about the ozone layer, a protective barrier around the planet which filters UV, and how the muggle pollution is *destroying* it! Of course, no one cares or even really

believes him, but I investigated his research myself—I know, I *know*—you *must* keep this between us—but he's quite right. Mark my words, friend, in the years to come, we shall be hearing far more about this. Once it's become a dire issue that can no longer be ignored, of course. Typical of muggles, right?"

"…He speaksss…"

Harry grinned. Apparently this snake was a one-response kind of creature.

Tom didn't seem to mind. "They have all sorts of silly practices, these muggles," he went on conversationally. Harry got the impression that he spoke far more freely to this little snake than he *ever* did with *people*. "The way they act as though they own the earth, dividing up areas in grids like Mother Nature will bend to their rules and regulations. It's ridiculous. It's we who conform to the landscape, not the other way around, you know?"

The snake hissed wordlessly. Tom nodded.

"Indeed. And here, in Finland—do you know what the muggles who live here do? How they count their wealth?" Tom paused for a moment, like he might get a real response. He didn't. "Reindeer," he answered himself. "The locals tag the reindeer who live in these woods, claiming them as their own based on the insignia. Is that not the most asinine thing you have ever heard? Claiming to own another creature's life by branding it, to think that you can own a living being like that which wants nothing to do with you?"

"…He speaksss… A lot…"

For a moment, Tom's face was thunderstruck. Harry laughed out loud again, shocked at how the snake—which he had assumed to not be very intelligent—had just insulted Tom Riddle in a way that no witch or wizard would dare.

But after pause in which Tom looked stunned, he too was laughing. "Are you saying you don't enjoy my company, friend? Do my musings *bore* you?" And though his questions were probably honest, Tom sounded affectionate when he asked them. He was grinning. "What, would you prefer I be a mindless source of warmth for you? Am I nothing more to you than a body-heat *whore?"*

Harry snorted he laughed so hard at that. He laughed even harder when the snake responded with a simple, unaffected, "Yessss."

Tom scoffed, but he couldn't seem to wipe the smile from his face. "Someday," he said curtly, "I shall have to acquire myself a serpent that actually *likes* me."

The snake didn't respond to that. Tom also fell into silence, returning his full attention towards the sky. Harry did, too. For a long time they both observed it: the splendor of the Aurora Borealis.

Harry had never seen it before in person, but he was sure that even if he was someday able to—even if he got his sight back and was able to leave his prison—it would pale in comparison to this memory. Tom Riddle's vision was sublime. Harry's had been mediocre, even with his glasses.

The slight sounds of something stirring in the woods made both Harry and the Tom Riddle of the memory to turn. Tom sat up, causing his little friend to hide hurriedly under his scarf. Harry gaped in astonishment at what emerged from the tree line. It was a reindeer, just as Tom had been speaking about before. Shockingly close, but far enough away to be untouchable. A magnificent, fully antlered stag.

A *stag.*

It stood stock still, staring directly at Tom. The bluebell flames reflected in its wide, black eyes and bathed it in a cool light, making it appear ghostly and unnatural.

"…No one owns you," Tom said softly.

The stag watched him for a moment longer before quietly disappearing back into the forest.

The memory vanished.

For the first time, Harry didn't descend back into his cell in a world of blackness afterwards. When the woods of Finland disappeared, Lord Voldemort did not.

He was still there; had, apparently, been there the entire time. Voldemort continued to hold Harry's face in his hands, and that lovely light was permeating the air, warm and welcoming. But Harry remained blind.

Harry tried not to let the disorienting memory nor the blissful sensation of their connection disarm him. This was *Voldemort.* This was a mass-murdering sociopath, no matter what happy memories he

showed him or what enthralling… *thing* he was able to do to him because he was his horcrux.

Voldemort's magic fluctuated in anticipation. He was waiting for Harry to say something, to finally break.

Harry wouldn't. "I'll never beg," he whispered. Voldemort's fingers tightened on his face. "I'll never beg you for anything. Never."

A plethora of dark emotions stirred the air: anger, disappointment, disbelief. But among them was something which was not sinister, which made the black atmosphere of Voldemort's magic just a bit less dark. Harry opened his unseeing eyes in surprise when he realized what it was. And though he was blind, he knew with certainty that he was looking directly into the Dark Lord's face, could feel exactly where Voldemort's eyes were.

The Dark Lord was harboring just the tiniest hint of *fondness* for his human horcrux.

Harry waited for a fierce, angry response to his declaration. He was shocked even further by what Voldemort said instead.

"…Good."

The buoyant warmth vanished. Voldemort released his grip from Harry's face. Harry reached for him—an instant reaction in an attempt to keep the light if for only a second longer—but when he did, his hands met nothing but empty air.

The gate creaked open.

"Do not disappoint me, Harry."

And with that cryptic message swathed in an aura of conflicting resentment and mild affection, the Dark Lord disappeared.

Chapter End Notes

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Deceptions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The moment the Dark Lord left him, Harry's mind went wild with speculation. Was he going to punish and harm Narcissa now? Would Voldemort be enraged that she had been kind to him? Would Harry ever see the only person who made this existence bearable again?

What on earth had the Dark Lord meant to accomplish by showing Harry that vision of the forest and the stag? And then, just before he'd left, when Harry had told him the opposite of what he'd wanted to hear...

I'll never beg you for anything.

Fondness.

…*Why?*

Harry threaded his fingers through his hair, resisting the urge to rip it from his scalp. He was baffled by all of it. He didn't understand what the Dark Lord *wanted* from him!

He took a deep breath and dropped his hands into his lap. *At least I still have the enchanted blanket,* he thought morbidly.

…But he would be receiving no Dreamless Draught, tonight.

Well, he certainly wasn't feeling relaxed enough to sleep without it. Maybe he wouldn't have been able to, even if he tried. Dependency and all that. Harry wrapped the blanket around his shoulders and decided to dedicate the evening to practicing Occlumency.

A deep breath in, a deep breath out…

Think of no one, think of nothing…

A deep breath in, a deep breath out…

The night passed slowly.

By the time he assumed it was morning, Harry hadn't slept a wink.

Had it really been that long? Maybe not, maybe only a few hours had passed. In the end, Harry wasn't entirely surprised when, though he heard footsteps, the aura which accompanied them was black and cold.

Harry turned at the sound of the gate swinging open; had just opened his mouth to demand that Voldemort tell him what he had done to Narcissa, when—

"Hello, child."

…What?

The words died in Harry's throat at the sound of not *Voldemort's,* but… *Narcissa's* voice.

Harry said nothing. He did nothing. He held his breath as he sat there, feeling with certainty that familiar, icy magic. Black and ruthless. *Voldemort.*

"How are you feeling?"

Narcissa's voice.

Narcissa's footsteps, walking towards him. Narcissa's hands, smoothing the skin on his forehead.

Voldemort's magic.

"…Child?"

The ridiculous conclusion he came to almost caused Harry to gasp.

Voldemort was here—under the influence of Polyjuice Potion—*pretending* to be Narcissa Malfoy.

…Why?

But Voldemort had absolutely no idea that Harry knew it was him. Harry gripped the blanket wrapped around his shoulders tighter. "F-fine," he stuttered, trying desperately to act as he normally would around Narcissa. "I'm f-fine."

His mind raced. Narcissa—Voldemort—handed him a goblet. "Drink."

Harry could *feel* his hands quivering. He took the goblet and drank as slowly as he could, stalling for time so that he could gather himself.

Why on earth would the Dark Lord be here, pretending to be her? What the *hell* was Voldemort up to with this?

One part of Harry—the reckless, Gryffindor part—was tempted to call him out on it right then and there. To casually hand the goblet back to him and say:

'*Thank you for the water… my Lord.'*

And while that would certainly grant him one moment of extreme satisfaction, not even he, Harry James Potter, was *that* tactless.

Whatever the Dark Lord was planning on doing, he was confident that Harry thought this to be Narcissa Malfoy in his cell with him. Harry decided to let him believe that.

Once the goblet was empty, Harry handed it back to him. "Did he hurt you?" he asked, because that undoubtedly would have been his first question were this really Narcissa. "Did he do anything to you, or to —"

"No." Voldemort must have vanished the goblet. He began to run one hand through Harry's hair while the other cupped his face in a motherly fashion. But that *blackness.* Harry noticed the way that it almost twitched and swirled when he sounded so concerned, and—

Envy?

Lord Voldemort was *envious?*

"He did not harm me, child. He was… merciful."

Harry had no idea if this was the truth or not. "G-good," he said, trying to sound relieved. "I thought that he would—"

"Shhh…" Voldemort placed a finger to his lips, and *God* was it strange, to feel Narcissa's warm hands on his face while at the same time experience the frigidity of the Dark Lord's magic. "Do not panic. I am fine."

And his acting was *superb!* He spoke with the same inflection, the *exact* same tone—and Voldemort was pulling him into an embrace, just like Narcissa would have—

Hug him back, Harry had to remind himself. *If this were really Narcissa Malfoy, you would hug her back.*

Hoping that the action didn't seem forced, Harry did. The second he wrapped his arms around Narcissa's waist, Voldemort pulled him even closer, even tighter, holding him in a way that the Dark Lord would surely *never* do in his own body. And before Harry could even begin to comprehend this bizarre occurrence, he was shocked even further.

Voldemort was *smelling* him.

Harry hoped that maybe he had imagined it, but he knew he hadn't. Voldemort had *definitely* pressed his face up against his neck and inhaled deeply through Narcissa's nose. Harry's arms went limp, but he otherwise did not react. Almost reluctantly, Voldemort pulled away as well. His magic began whirling about animatedly. There was something a bit antsy about it. Nervousness, maybe? Excitement?

"…I need something from you, Harry."

Harry's breath hitched.

Well, the Dark Lord *had* screwed up in his impersonation at least once, then. Narcissa never called him Harry, for whatever reason.

"You n-need something from me?"

Voldemort's magic stirred in response. Harry had a very, very bad feeling.

"Yes," the Dark Lord answered. His magic may have been anticipatory, but Narcissa's voice was convincingly dreadful and pitying. "He… has asked me to take something from you. I have to do it, I have to. It will be… very unpleasant. But it won't really harm you, and I will do it as painlessly as possible, I promise." He paused, running the fingers of a caring woman through his hair again. "You do trust me, don't you, Harry?"

Harry hesitated, thinking before answering. Whatever it was that Voldemort wanted from him—whatever he could possibly desire that he had not already taken—he was going to get it, no matter what. What could possibly be gained from fighting him?

Harry grabbed his hand. It felt incredibly surreal, to hold a hand which was pleasant and warm and know that he was touching the Dark Lord. Harry opened his eyes, knowing without question that his gaze was directed towards irises of silver that concealed the monster within.

"Do what you have to do. Take whatever you have to from me, so long as it means that no one else will get hurt…" Harry paused, his voice full of real, raw emotion.

"My life is worthless down here anyway."

The black aura shifted at once. It became brighter than it ever had been, tinted with a scarlet hue that was disarmingly fierce. Harry almost winced at the intensity of it.

"Your life," came the stern but feminine voice of Narcissa, "is *anything* but worthless."

Harry held Voldemort's false hands more tightly, continuing to make sure that the Dark Lord was staring right into the eyes he had stolen the sight from. "Do what you have to do," he repeated in a whisper.

Voldemort stepped away. Harry heard the sounds of shifting robes when he stood, and he wondered wildly for a moment just what lengths Voldemort had to go to in order to accurately impersonate Narcissa.

"Don't move," the Dark Lord said. "And know that it will be over soon."

There was a pause in which Voldemort's magic seemed to freeze. Like maybe, for just a moment, he was reconsidering doing whatever it was he was planning. Like he might change his mind.

He didn't.

"*Expecto magicae."*

At first, Harry wasn't sure if anything was happening. He *was* certain that a spell had just been aimed at him, as he felt a sort of tingly sensation in his chest when Voldemort uttered the words... but then nothing.

"What… What are you—"

Excruciating pain.

It exploded in Harry's very core, a manic energy tearing at his ribcage. It felt like Voldemort had just reached into his chest with razorblades and was hollowing him out. Harry screamed, a bloodcurdling and chilling sound. It ricocheted off the walls and assaulted his own ears.

Harry *would* have begged then—he would have begged the Dark Lord

to stop, only he couldn't form words. It was worse, somehow, than the Cruciatus Curse. This was a pain that went beyond his body, deeper than his skin and bones. It was as if his very essence was being ripped in half, a part of him that was never meant to be touched forced to endure the darkness and pain of his reality.

Just as he was certain that the pain couldn't get any worse, it did. Bone-shattering agony tore across his mind, stealing his breath away and ending his screams. The turbulent force inside of his chest finally broke free in one violent tear of anguish.

And then, light and… emptiness.

The pain became dulled after that climactic moment, but it was replaced by a coldness that was entirely different than Voldemort's magic. It wasn't icy or frigid, no, just… absence. Harry's body felt hollow.

But *outside* of his body…

There was a light like nothing he had ever experienced before. Brilliant and warm. It shone like a sun, bathing the dark space with an glow that could only be described as golden. It hovered over him, saturating the air and making the Dark Lord's blackness seemingly recede into the corners of the cell like unwanted shadows.

The sharp sound of Narcissa Malfoy gasp told Harry he wasn't alone in being fascinated.

Harry was so mesmerized by this light that it took him some time to realize what it was. This warm hue, this golden entity that was so vibrant and pure, was… It was *attached* to him. It was clinging to his skin, thrumming in tandem with his racing pulse…

This was *his* magic…

This, here, was Harry's own magical energy, only Voldemort had somehow pulled it from his body... but not entirely. It was still linked to him with filaments like liquid light. Harry felt like his heart had been torn from his chest, still beating, continuing to pump blood through veins which remained connected, even when exposed to cold, empty air.

"You truly are everything that… he is not," whispered the voice of Narcissa reverently. The blackness twitched in excitement.

Harry's own astonishment died at once. Fear, more crushing than Harry had ever experienced, consumed him. "Don't take it," he begged, not caring even slightly that he had sworn to never do such a thing. Because he knew, without a doubt, that if Voldemort somehow severed the filaments which connected this light to him, he would be worse than dead. If this absence in his chest became permanent, he would not be able to stand it, he would—

"No," Voldemort responded. Harry heard him take a step, and imagined that he was getting closer to that brilliant light. The Dark Lord's magic was becoming livelier, eager. "I could not take it from you. Not completely. No one could… It is yours."

Then Harry felt the strangest sensation of all. Not very painful, but… uncomfortable. It felt like a dulled version of the sensation he had just experienced within his chest before, like nails being dragged along the outside of that light and scraping away some of its radiant surface. Harry had a horrible feeling that the only reason it was not as agonizing as before was because it was currently not inside of him.

But that slight pain was nothing compared to the emptiness he felt in his chest. Harry would absolutely choose pain over this hollowness. Any pain, the worst pain, the entire world's pain would be preferable. Harry curled into himself, pulling his knees to his chest and shaking violently. "H-hurry," he whispered, hardly able to get the word out.

The dulled, scraping sensation stopped. "Prepare yourself," Voldemort said. The tone was a bit too emotionless to convincingly belong to Narcissa.

Harry got his wish.

The emptiness within him vanished, and Harry's entire being was filled with agony. His soul was on fire with it. He howled at the onslaught, an emotional wail that instantly made his throat sore and his eyes water. There was no help for it. It was too intense. Tears fell from Harry's eyes the second the pain hit him, and once they started, they would not stop.

Harry cried.

The gorgeous light from the cell was gone, having been placed back where it belonged. But it wasn't the same. Harry felt like some vital part of him had been ravaged, stripped bare so that the nerve endings were exposed. Only it was inside of him once more, and so it radiated in every bone and muscle. With every labored breath he felt it—

burning, torrid pain.

"You will heal," Voldemort said, and again, the tone sounded wrong coming from Narcissa. It seemed that the Dark Lord, who had been perfect at pretending to be something he was not for much of his life, could not keep up the façade now. For if the real Narcissa Malfoy had been forced to do this to him, she would have rushed to his side the moment she finished. She would have held him and whispered apologies into his ear. She may have even cried with him.

Voldemort did none of these things.

The Dark Lord left, and Harry was too consumed by suffering to tell what he may have been feeling as he went.

Eventually, the pain lessened.

Not entirely, but it diminished to something more bearable. After hours of endless, pathetic sobbing, the fire in Harry's core had dulled so that it was no longer burning, but… smoldering. It still hurt, especially when he moved too suddenly. Harry hissed in pain when he sat up. He imagined this might be how it would feel to recover from surgery, only without any pain medication.

Harry thought he would give just about anything to see the real Narcissa again, with her sweetness, lullabies, and the promise of a dreamless night's sleep. But he knew he never would.

Harry stifled another sob, wiping away the residual tears on his face. If Narcissa was not going to be the one to take care of him any longer, then who would? Harry had a feeling that Voldemort wouldn't be able to do it. The Dark Lord hadn't even been able to stay in a cell with him for five seconds when he'd started crying, and that was when he was *supposed* to be pretending to care. So who would it be?

Not much time passed before Harry could tell that he was going to get his answer.

Timid footsteps announced the presence of someone new. Harry could hear whoever it was hovering outside of the gates, wary and extremely nervous. The aura was fascinating: Harry could appreciate it even through his pain. It was bright, silver with just the slightest hint of blue. Somewhat reminiscent of Narcissa's, but not overly so. It was far too light. It made Harry think of healing and restoration; of a patronus.

Perhaps this was Madam Pomfrey, he mused. The second he thought it he realized he was probably right. It was entirely possible that the Dark Lord had acquired either her or some other Healer to tend to him now. Harry waited patiently, not saying anything. The gate creaked open slowly when they finally mustered up the courage to enter.

"Fucking hell."

Harry's head snapped up, his eyes instinctively flying open. The voice did *not* match the aura. *"Malfoy?"*

Draco Malfoy verbally winced, and his light and luminescent magic became frazzled. Stunned at the sight of Harry's eyes, probably. And the rest of him. "What… what the *hell* has he done to you?" he gasped.

Harry didn't deign that question with a response. He was sure that Draco knew he had been blinded. "He sent *you* down here? …*Why?"*

"I… am equally unhappy about the arrangement." Draco swallowed audibly. "Potter," he added.

There was a pause in which Harry thought he might laugh. But the amusement was fleeting, and the pain in his chest too strong.

"H-here," Draco said, clearly fumbling. "I'm supposed to… I don't know, give you—"

"I don't need anything," Harry interrupted. He was suddenly furious. Voldemort had put him through hell, gifting him excruciating, lingering pain so that he could—what? Use whatever residual magic he had stolen from him for something? Harry was suffering too much to think of what that could possibly be—and now, *now* he had taken away the beauty of Narcissa Malfoy... and given him her *son* instead.

"Just leave, Malfoy."

"I…I can't—"

"Yes, you can," Harry snapped. "Just turn around and walk away. You're good at that."

"Don't." Surprisingly, Draco didn't rise to the bait. He knelt at Harry's side and forced a cup into his hands. "You have to drink water, at least. I'm… I'm not leaving until you do."

Harry hated that this was a real incentive to cooperate. Grudgingly, he

took the cup and drank. "There," he said when he was done. Rather than hand the cup back to him, Harry tossed it across the cell where it hit the wall with sharp *bang*.

"Cute," Malfoy muttered.

Harry was about to tell him to piss off when his thoughts took an abrupt turn. He reached out and grabbed the front of Draco's robes.

"You owe me, Malfoy" he said. Draco's magic shook in anxiety. "I didn't need to go back into that Fiendfyre and save your arse, but I did. *You owe me*." Harry pulled him closer, pleading now. "Help me get out of here. Help me escape. Please."

Draco tried to pry his fingers off of his clothes, but Harry's grip, despite how weak he felt, was ironclad. "D-don't ask me to do that," he said. "Don't, you know I can't, you know that's impossible—you're *blind*, and—and even if I could somehow get you out—which I *can't*—he'd k-kill me—"

"Then come with me," Harry said. "We can both go, the Order will protect you—"

"Then he'd kill my parents!" Draco shouted, unmoved by Harry's pleas. "Or my friends, or—"

"And what about *my* friends? What about Ron and Hermione? They're still out there, and if he finds them while I'm in here, he'll—he'll—"

"I know!" Draco finally succeeded in shoving Harry off of him. He must have fled to the far side of the cell, for when Harry reached out again, his hands met nothing but empty air. "You think I don't know what will happen? You think that they're the only ones out there who are freaking the fuck out, trying to survive?"

Harry gaped, trying to think of a response to that. Draco's aura turned a slightly deeper hue, weighed down by misery and guilt. "It's a fucked up world out there, Potter. *His* world. We're all just trying to figure out how to live in it."

Draco shuffled away, opening the gate so that he could escape.

"Wait," Harry called. "Wait, I… I have a question."

Draco paused. Harry could feel his magic shaking on the outside of the iron bars, nervous again. "…What is it?"

Harry swallowed thickly. "What… What reason has he given you for keeping me here?"

It was something that Harry had been curious about for a while. He knew exactly why he was being held here, of course, but Harry wondered what reason Voldemort could possibly have given to his Death Eaters. What explanation had he told his closest followers for keeping alive the very person he had wanted desperately for years to kill?

Draco fell silent. Harry feared he was going to ignore his question and leave.

"He said… He said he likes trophies," Draco finally answered, his voice hollow.

Harry laughed. The action hurt almost more than he could stand, but he couldn't help it. He laughed harder and longer than he had in a long time.

He didn't notice when Draco left.

The next time Harry was forced to endure his schoolboy nemesis's presence, he was determined not to be hostile.

Harry had hours to plot, alone in the darkness of his cell. Hours in which Voldemort did not visit him again, hours where he thought up ways that he could appeal to Draco's guilt and possibly convince him to help him escape. Harry knew, deep down, that it would never happen, but what else could he do? He felt it was a better use of his time than to try and practice Occlumency, and it did manage to somewhat distract him from his pain.

Yet the moment Draco reappeared, with his bizarrely light, magical energy, Harry's plans became derailed. There was a powerful wave of anguish which filled the air the moment Draco came close. His emotions were distraught. Suffocatingly so.

"What is it?" Harry asked, not caring if it would come across as weird that he could tell something was amiss before Draco had spoken. "What's happened?"

Draco's magic became an even more powerful cloud of strain and indecision. Harry could sense how torn he was, how deeply he did not want to answer that question. Harry's heart thundered in his chest.

"Malfoy," Harry said, his panic mounting, "Malfoy, *tell me* what—"

"It's Weasley."

Draco's voice was a whisper, but Harry heard it loud and clear. His sporadic heartbeat froze.

"They… found Ron Weasley."

Chapter End Notes

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A Gift

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"…No."

Denial.

Harry's initial reaction to Draco's words was complete and total denial. They had not, *could* not have caught Ron. It was not possible.

No.

"Yes."

Draco's voice was hoarse, and his magic was stringent with a tension that screamed of honesty. Harry hid his face in his hands, not wanting to believe it, but Draco went on. "They f-found him just a few hours ago. The Snatchers."

Harry looked up, eyes open but seeing nothing. "Hermione?" he gasped.

"No," Draco answered. "No, they… It was just Weasley they caught. Not Granger."

"What? How?" Harry shook his head in disbelief. How could they possibly catch one of them and not the other? Hermione wouldn't abandon Ron for any reason.

"I dunno," Draco said. Harry could hear him begin to pace, and his magic, too, became more sporadic. "I dunno, it all happened really quickly, and I was just told that it was only Weasley they got, but now my parents are both at the Ministry, helping to deal with all of the madness—"

"What's going to happen to him?" Harry interrupted. "Malfoy, what are they going to do with Ron? Where is he now? What's…"

His voice trailed off, unable to finish, but Draco must have understood. His aura calmed into a melancholy state, less frazzled and infinitely more pitying. "My parents didn't get a chance to tell me all of the details," he admitted. "And I probably shouldn't even be telling

you—"

"I swear to God, Malfoy," Harry seethed, and he even began to push himself to his feet. "If you don't—"

"I'm going to!" Draco put his hands on Harry's shoulders, easily pushing his emaciated form back into a seated position on the ground. "Merlin, don't threaten me, Potter, you're not in any state—and *yes*, I *owe* you, so *yes*, I'm going to tell you—so just *calm down*."

The very last thing Harry could do was *calm down*, but he stayed still and listened all the same. "As I was saying," Draco continued, stepping away once he was certain that Harry wasn't going to try blindly charging at him, "they found Weasley a few hours ago, and I guess Granger was with him, but she got away somehow. I don't know exactly how it all happened, so don't ask. But Weasley is in Azkaban now, and he's going to have a trial on Monday."

Harry felt numb. "What day is it?" he asked in a bizarrely calm voice.

"It's… It's Sunday."

Harry took a deep breath, holding onto his odd state of detachment and wishing that it would last forever. "What is he being tried for, exactly?"

"Treason, mostly. For conspiring against the Ministry and for consorting with a wanted, unregistered muggle-born."

Hermione Granger, of course. Harry's hands curled into fists at his sides, his fingernails biting into his skin. "And what's going to happen when they inevitably find him guilty?"

Draco was silent for a long time, but his magic whirled in a cloud of indecisiveness. Harry could sense that he knew the answer, but was unwilling to say it. "Malfoy, you *have* to tell me. I'm going to find out inevitably."

"They're going to offer him a deal," Draco said. "You don't… You don't know what things have been like, just in the past few hours, Potter. Everything is *insane* at the Ministry, what with Ron Weasley being captured, and with the Dark Lord…"

His magic shuddered. It seemed that, whatever train of thought Draco was having concerning his master, he was unable to articulate it.

"What?" Harry prompted, panicked. "What about him, what's happened with Vol—"

"*Don't say his name!"* Draco hissed at once. Whether it was because of the Taboo or for other reasons, Harry wasn't sure. "Just—let's just say that the Dark Lord has become very, very public as of this morning, and it just so happened that Weasley was kidnapped at right around the same time, and it's all just total fucking mayhem right now."

He paused, his aura vibrating with stress. "They're going to tell Weasley that if he says it was all Granger who talked him into turning against the Dark Lord and the wizarding community of Britain—that it was *she* who persuaded him to turn against his *own* kind—then they'll give him a tolerable sentence. Ten years, maybe. Especially if he gives them information that leads to her capture."

"He will never do that," Harry said at once. "Even if they tried to Imperius him. He'd fight it. Ron would never, ever do that to her."

"I know," Draco whispered.

There was a heavy stretch of silence. Harry hated that he had to even ask the next question, because he knew that Draco could feel it coming. "…What will they do to Ron, then? When he fails to cooperate?"

Harry hated even more that he knew the answer before it was spoken.

"The… He'll be sentenced to the kiss."

"No."

Harry was on his feet before he realized he wanted to stand. The blood rushed to his head, making him dizzy, but he steadied himself against the wall. "No, no, no," he repeated. When Draco came to make sure he wouldn't fall, Harry clutched at his shoulders with all of the energy he had left.

"Ow—*don't*—"

"Get me out of here," Harry demanded. "Take me now, while there's no one else here and everyone is distracted—take me to—"

"To *where?*" Draco snarled, but his voice was too full of emotion to come off as sinister as he'd probably intended. "To the Ministry? To Azkaban? To the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, which

could be anywhere now, if it even still *exists*—"

"I don't know!" Harry shouted, and his whole body ached with the horrible, lingering pain from whatever Voldemort had done to him. "I don't know, just—take me to *him*, take me to the Dark Lord so that I can talk to him, before—"

Draco's laugh was instant, cold, and mirthless. "*Talk* to him? *You?*" he balked. "Have you lost your mind completely, Potter?"

"I have to do something, Malfoy. I can't just sit down here in this cell while my friend becomes worse than dead. You have to take me to him, you have to let me try—"

"Absolutely not." Draco shoved him away, hard. Harry fell to the floor, hissing in pain when his elbow collided with the concrete. "I was told to keep you here and keep you alive, and—and that's what I'm going to do."

Harry scrambled to his feet again, but by the time he was standing, the gate had already opened and closed. Draco was leaving him.

"No—*No!* Malfoy!" Harry shouted, reaching blindly for the metal bars towards where he could feel his magic. "Malfoy, don't you *fucking* leave me here, don't you *dare*—"

"I'll be back once you've stopped screaming," he muttered. Draco's voice was empty, and his aura deepened into a hue of unfathomable, deep remorse.

But the proof of his guilt was meaningless to Harry. "Malfoy!" he screamed, beyond furious when he heard him walk away. Harry shook the gate violently. "Draco Malfoy! Don't leave me, don't do this—*I didn't leave you!* I saved your life, Malfoy! I *saved* you! *Help me save him!"*

No response. Draco's magic vanished.

Harry screamed and screamed, shouting pleas and demands, but Draco never once answered him. It wasn't long until Harry lost his voice. He rattled the bars of his cell until he grew too weak to do even that. His body failed him, and after only a few minutes he slumped to the floor, voiceless, blind, and entirely hopeless.

He had nothing left.

Harry never had the thought of not wanting to live anymore.

He did not lay there, curled on his side on the cold stones and think, 'I want to die.'

No. What he thought, with a mind that had fallen into a state of numbness, was:

So this is it.

This was the end of it all. Soon, Ron would be soulless, Hermione would surely be caught as well, and he, Harry Potter, would exist forever as a prisoner in a dark and frigid cell. Blind, weak. Constantly in pain.

And while he did not have the thought of wanting to die, Harry certainly had the notion that he would like the pain to stop.

I just want this suffering to end, though to whom he was making the request, he wasn't sure. God, maybe? Harry decided that was good enough. He pulled his knees to his chest and tangled his fingers together, wrapping them around his legs. For the first time since he'd gotten out of the cupboard, Harry James Potter said a silent prayer.

Just let the pain end. Just take it all away.

He received a response in the form of a cold, nearly intangible wind. A chilly breeze that swept across his skin like a phantom's caress. It didn't scare him. Cool as it may have been, it was not sinister or black like Voldemort's aura. This was a friendly energy.

This was *his.*

Harry had heard many stories of how accidental magic had saved people's lives, and had even experienced such miracles himself, but he had never heard of the opposite being true. Yet now, as the coolness wrapped around his limbs, he could sense that this was what was happening to him.

His magic was saving him from this suffering.

Harry sighed. The chill was like a balm, numbing the pain in his bones and lessening it. And though the cold was uncomfortable—highly so, at first—the discomfort was fleeting. Soon, he could hardly feel his body at all, and he knew that the descent into death would not be a long one.

Everything was cold, dark, and silent. Harry decided then that no, he was not afraid. His lips twitched into a smile. He thought of his parents, of Sirius and Remus. He was not scared at all.

He thought it was over when the light danced across his mind. It was bright, radiant, and welcoming.

Harry opened his eyes, but he did not see the familiar faces of lost loved ones. He didn't see anything, but that *light*…

It was overwhelming, so brilliant and alluring. He felt arms being wrapped around him, warm and soft, and with the physical contact, the light became exponentially stronger.

"Come back to me, come back to me, come back—"

There was a voice chorusing a panicked whisper, the sensation of lips like fire pleading against his temple and into his ear. Hands were rubbing his arms and face like they were trying to warm him; to force the life back into him and stave off the coldness.

It was working. Harry gasped when he realized exactly what was happening. This light was *not* the peace of death… but the *horror* of Lord Voldemort.

He tried to resist it. Harry grappled for the coolness of his magic to return, to reform and pull him back under its surface and end his miserable life. With limbs that were heavy and weak, he pushed against Voldemort's chest, trying to force him away.

It was useless. The second Harry tried to resist him, the beautiful light became so warm and inviting that it was like a siren's call. "*No*—come back to me, my soul, come back—"

The surrender was inevitable. Harry's muscles all relaxed at the same time, practically melting into the pleasant warmth of Voldemort's arms and sinking into the light. The Dark Lord let out an uncharacteristic, emotion-filled sound; something that was beyond relieved. He pulled Harry to his chest, gathering him into a tight embrace.

Harry sighed in bliss as the aching pain from before was completely, blessedly wiped away. He buried his head into the crook of the Dark Lord's neck, relishing the sensation of such warmth. Then, unthinking, he reached up to touch Voldemort's face.

Voldemort caught his hand before he could. And maybe he had just died after all, Harry thought, and this was some crazy vision his mind had conjured up, because… because the Dark Lord had grabbed his hand and started to *kiss his fingers*, trailing his lips across his knuckles in an fashion that was far too tender to *ever* be done by Lord Voldemort.

There was no coldness on his lips. Just light.

"Not you," he whispered into his palm. "Never you," a promise breathed into his wrist.

Voldemort wove his fingers between Harry's. His other arm curled around his waist.

"Rest," he murmured. The Dark Lord pressed his lips to Harry's forehead, soft and gentle.

Harry fell at once into a dreamless sleep.

"…A gift."

Harry awoke to the sound of the Dark Lord's voice.

He felt more than a bit disoriented as the memory formed itself around him. A world of snowy planes and thick forests materialized. Harry was sitting in a familiar scene. It was Finland again. Harry shook his head, trying to gather himself under a sky of magnificent, transient hues.

Had that all really happened? With Draco, Ron, and everything? Or had it all been a nightmare? Maybe… maybe he had just fallen asleep without the aid of a Dreamless Draught, and that horrifying experience had been the result. A nightmare.

Feeling unsure, Harry decided to hold onto this possibility for the moment. It wasn't like there was anything he could say or do while he was trapped in another of the Dark Lord's memories, anyway. Harry looked to his immediate left, where the Tom Riddle of the past rested, once more surrounded by a ring of bluebell flames.

He looked older than the last memory in which Harry had seen him. Older, and much more… *regal.* He was not in muggle clothes, this time, but long, sweeping robes of black. His face, while still youthful and handsome, was a bit gaunter than before, his skin paler. It was

difficult to see his features clearly, however, as he had his eyes closed and his head bowed, like he was deep in thought. It was like the glorious sky held no significance to him any longer. This must have been sometime before Tom Riddle went to Hogwarts to apply for a teaching position, Harry concluded. His late twenties or early thirties.

But what was most astonishing by far about this memory was Riddle's *magic*.

Harry must have been getting better at his ability to sense auras every day, for he had never been able to feel anyone's magic in a memory before. He could certainly perceive it now. Harry could sense it both with his mind and, while in the memory, *visibly*.

Harry watched in awe at the way Riddle's magic flickered and whirled around him. It was a very different experience than solely being able to sense it; Harry could literally *see* the way the black cloud of darkness shifted about, as well as feel its temperament.

It was not nearly as black or cold as the Dark Lord of the present's magic was. This aura was dark, true, and ominous, but… But there was a bit of a glint to it, a hint of light. Harry could see it when it twitched and moved, the slightest sparkle of something glimmering, almost golden. It reminded him of an obsidian ore, shining when it caught the light just right.

It was both exquisite and frightening. Harry sat at Tom's side and observed it for a long time, much more mesmerized by its loveliness than the kaleidoscopic sky.

When Tom Riddle spoke, his eyes still closed and head still bowed, Harry physically jumped.

"Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?"

Harry turned, looking to see if *this* memory really did have someone else in it. He didn't see anyone. He didn't see a snake either. Harry scoffed, looking up the sky that Tom Riddle himself seemed so uninterested in.

It *was* beautiful, even more so than the last memory. The colors seemed brighter, the stars a bit more glittery. He watched with speculative interest, wondering if this was a place that Tom Riddle used to visit often, and that was why he had so many memories of it. Harry couldn't blame him. It was peaceful, here.

"…I asked you a question."

Harry's heart froze.

He looked back to Tom Riddle to find that *Tom Riddle was looking back at him.*

Riddle's face, illuminated by the cerulean light of the bluebell flames, was expressionless, but his gaze was undoubtedly focused on *Harry*. And his *eyes*… His eyes were not the dark, nearly black color of Tom Riddle's, but a vivid, far too familiar scarlet. His irises shone like garnets in the cool firelight, brightly crimson around pupils that were not slit like a cat's, but round, human-like.

Eyes that were infinitely closer… to *Voldemort's eyes.*

Harry gasped as it dawned on him.

Fingers quivering, he reached forward, half-expecting his hand to pass right through Riddle's when he went to touch him. It didn't. Harry's fingers rested on a hand that corporal and solid… and *warm*, so *warm*, not unnaturally cold…

The glinting, black magic whirled energetically, the fragments of light glittering within the darkness like bits of gold.

This was not a memory.

This was *real.*

The Dark Lord lifted his hand, bringing Harry's up with it and intertwining their fingers together as he did. Warmth, pleasant and lovely, blossomed in Harry's soul at the action. He gaped, staring into those red, vibrant eyes.

He could see.

Voldemort smiled. His lips were not thin and withered but full, youthful. He took in Harry's expression and laughed softly. It wasn't the high-pitched, nightmarish tenor of a mass-murdering villain. It wasn't the expression of the most dangerous, ruthless man in wizarding history.

Lord Voldemort didn't look like a monster. Not anymore.

His smile widened. When he spoke, his voice was kind and gentle.

"Hello, Harry."

Chapter End Notes

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Turbulent Discord

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry's mind lurched back to life with a sickening jolt. He yanked his hand away, clutching it to himself and shaking. The light vanished. His chest heaved as terror shot up his spine, making him feel ill.

Harry had too many fearful questions and accusations came to be able to articulate a single one. How did Voldemort become like this? Is that what he'd used his magic for? Was Narcissa all right? Did he hurt her or Draco? And, most importantly, *what happened to Ron?* Was he still alive—would he still be alive tomorrow? He couldn't kill Ron, he couldn't subject him to the Dementor's kiss, he—

Harry's racing thoughts were derailed when the Dark Lord slipped behind him and draped his arms around his shoulders. Voldemort knelt behind him with his chest pressed against Harry's back.

"Say nothing," he murmured softly into Harry's ear—but the way his muscles tightened around Harry's shoulders made him shudder. However gently he was speaking, Voldemort's words were a *threat*. "The world and all of its turbulent discord will still be there, exactly as it is now, in five minutes' time. So for the next five minutes, I ask that you say nothing, only look." He placed his long, no-longer cold fingers under Harry's jaw, tilting his face upwards. The sky was a mesmeric shade of lilac; a dazzling, celestial blanket of stars.

"If you do this for me, I will answer all of your questions. I will listen to your concerns. I may even consider them. But only if, for the next *five minutes*, you… remain… silent."

Harry shuddered again. Voldemort had leaned in so close to his face with those last words that Harry could feel his lips brushing his ear with each syllable.

How badly did he want to scream incoherently, how tempted was he to slam his skull back into the Dark Lord's face and—and *what?* Try and get his wand? Make a run for it, here, in the middle of Finland? Maybe just go all in, and try his best to grab the Dark Lord by his pretty, new throat and strangle the life out of him?

Harry could feel Voldemort's muscles tense again, probably

anticipating the very likely outcome of Harry Potter responding in a resilient and moronic fashion. But Harry paused, looked at the stars, and took a deep breath.

He'd said that he would listen to him, if he stayed quiet. Maybe even consider his requests. Five minutes of obedient silence, and he could, conceivably, be saving Ron's life.

It wasn't a difficult decision to make, once he'd taken a moment to think it through.

Harry shut up and watched the sky.

Exactly five minutes later and the Dark Lord was true to his word.

Voldemort whispered one softly spoken word of praise in his ear, effectively breaking the silence, before tightening his hold around Harry's shoulders. Harry didn't even have time to blink before he was being ripped away, and he and the Dark Lord appeared in yet another familiar setting.

It was Malfoy Manor, but not the cryptic cell he had grown so unfortunately accustomed to. Or, at least, Harry *assumed* it was a part of Malfoy's giant, lavish home. They were in the Hall with the massive fireplace—the place where Harry had been forced to sign away Grimmauld Place to Bellatrix Lestrange, naked and mortified.

The memory did little to boost his confidence. The Dark Lord released his hold on him and stepped away. He first motioned towards the empty fireplace, wordlessly and wandlessly causing a fire to ignite. He then gestured lazily with the same hand towards the table. A chair scooted away from under its mahogany surface.

Harry stared. Voldemort turned and faced him, inclining his head towards the empty seat with no expression on his distressingly handsome face.

"Sit," he said.

Rage, which had admittedly waned during the eternity that was five minutes of star-gazing, sparked back to life in Harry's chest. He did not want to sit. He did not want to sit at all. "What have you done?" he spat, pleased to hear that his voice did not sound weak nor shaky, even if that was how he felt. "To yourself, to me—to Narcissa, to—to *Ron,* what have you done with him—"

"Nothing." Voldemort's clipped response was impassive. His magic, too, was relatively still. "I have done nothing to any of them."

"He's—Ron is in Azkaban, isn't he?" Voldemort nodded. "He has a trial tomorrow, and he's going to—you can't expect him to—he'll *never* blame Hermione for *anything,* he'll—you can't—"

Panic, wild and untamable, consumed him. Voldemort was in front of him in an instant, gripping both of his hands, and the light and blissful warmth bloomed in Harry's heart at the touch.

"Don't," Harry said, trying to pull his hands away. He couldn't. Voldemort was far too strong.

Harry glowered, hating that the buoyant feeling wiped the dread away so effortlessly. He hated that it made him want to sink into it and forget about absolutely everything else, because absolutely everything else was—what had he called it? Such *turbulent discord.*

"Ronald Weasley has a trial scheduled for tomorrow afternoon in front of the entire Wizengamot," Voldemort said in a detached voice. "He will be tried for treason against the Ministry. He will be given the opportunity to aid in the mission to locate the unregistered muggle-born, Hermione Granger. If he fails to cooperate, then his sentence shall be severe."

Harry opened his mouth to scream his protests, but Voldemort continued speaking before he could. "He will not be subjected to the Dementor's kiss. He will be sentenced to life in Azkaban."

"No," Harry said, trying again to pull his hands away. Voldemort let him, this time. The lightly pulsating warmth dissipated. "No, he can't —he can't stay in prison forever, stuck with dementors for the rest of his life."

Voldemort's magic twitched sporadically, and though his face remained unreadable, Harry could tell that he was annoyed. "He will live," he said quietly. "Your friend's life is being spared. You should be grateful."

Harry laughed mirthlessly. *"Grateful?"* he shouted, incredulous. "Grateful that my best friend is going to rot in a cell, as miserable as physically possible, for as long as he may live? Which probably won't be very long, seeing as the life expectancy in Azkaban isn't exactly high! Oh, yes, *thank you,* I'm so *grateful!*"

The chair which Voldemort had so politely invited Harry to sit in snapped in half; it took Harry a moment to register that he had done that. The unintended action made his chest hurt with a stinging pain, and he was reminded viscerally that he had not yet recovered from whatever the Dark Lord had done to him.

Voldemort did nothing when the chair shattered. He only stood there, as still and as cold as stone. His lack of reaction only fueled the fire of Harry's rage. "And I'm so grateful, too, for the *gift* of my sight back!" he yelled. "Thank you *so much* for the vision that *you* took away—because what? I called you a *fucking monster?"*

Whatever patience Voldemort had garnered upon his human horcrux's near magical suicide was quickly waning. He remained motionless as Harry screamed, but Harry could see it in the way his magic blackened and whirled, swelling with fury.

Harry didn't care. "You lock me up, take away my sight, force Narcissa Malfoy to take care of me and—and do whatever it is *she* did that has me feeling so bloody wonderful, now, *imprison* my friend, and I'm supposed to be *grateful?*"

Harry stepped towards the Dark Lord, looking boldly into his eyes. "I don't care what you did to yourself on the outside," he hissed. "You are *still*, and always *will* be, a *monster*."

In a dizzying rush of magic, Harry was flung against the wall, his head colliding with it so forcefully that his ears rang. Voldemort slammed his hands on either side of Harry's face, not touching him, but caging him against the wall with his arms. Harry's scar burned with a familiar pain that he hadn't felt in days.

The Dark Lord's magic was a suffocating mass of anger, pressing down on him like a smothering blanket. He leaned in so that he was speaking in Harry's ear, his voice quiet but deadly.

"Insult me one more time," he whispered, "and I shall tear your insolent tongue right out of your mouth."

Harry leaned in so that he, too, could whisper in Voldemort's ear, and said, "Fuck you."

The first thing Harry registered was the taste of blood.

A sharp, stinging pain exploded in his mouth, and it took him a second to comprehend what was happening. Voldemort had wrapped

his fingers around Harry's throat, viciously tight, and in then had—had crashed his lips over Harry's, wrenching open his mouth and had ensnared his tongue *with his teeth*—

He is literally going to bite my tongue off, Harry thought with a blank horror as the pain increased exponentially. Blood, hot and metallic, filled his mouth.

And just when he thought that it was actually going to happen—that Voldemort was going to tear away and take Harry's tongue with him—everything changed.

Harry wasn't sure how or why, but Voldemort had released his painful hold on Harry's tongue, and, with blood still filling his mouth, had begun to feel it with his own. The grip on his throat slackened, and somewhere in the midst of shock Harry realized that he was experiencing the most violent kiss of his life.

From Voldemort.

The pain in his scar vanished. The Dark Lord reached with his other hand, intertwining his fingers into Harry's mess of hair and forcing his head back against the wall, demanding more access. Harry was too stunned to do anything about it. Voldemort ravaged his mouth, claiming every crevice with his teeth and tongue, completely unbothered by the fact that there was blood *everywhere*.

Harry reached with both his hands, hoping to push Voldemort away. He never got the chance. Voldemort abruptly ended the chaos of their kiss, his hands still on Harry's throat and clawing at his hair. Harry, lightheaded, gasped for breath.

Voldemort's lips and chin were covered in blood. He smirked, and it was possibly the most horrifying sight that Harry had ever seen, to witness someone who looked like Tom Riddle with such a charming and crimson-stained smile. "I've changed my mind," he murmured, releasing his hold on Harry's throat and reaching into the pocket of his robe. "I like your insolent tongue just where it is."

He then placed something to Harry's wet, sticky mouth, and he realized with a jolt that it was the Elder Wand. Voldemort leaned in closer so that his blood-coated lips were against Harry's jaw when he whispered, "*Episkey*."

The stinging pain disappeared. The wound that Voldemort had inflicted stitched itself shut, though the blood remained. The Dark

Lord held him for a second longer, then stepped away and released him.

Harry spat the blood in his mouth into the floor. Voldemort ignored him, turning and striding away quite casually, like nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. He pointed his wand at the fractured chair and it reconstructed itself in a flash of magic.

"Your friend will be given a life sentence in Azkaban… though I may lessen his sentence if he does, at the very least, admit that his previous views on wizarding society were misguided." Voldemort stood before an ornate mirror which hung against the wall, and began vanishing the blood from his face as he spoke. "If he surrenders completely, as most wizards and witches who previously aligned themselves with Albus Dumbledore have, then I may be inclined to be more…" He paused, adjusting his robes and hair. By the time he turned to look at Harry again, he looked as pristine as he had before.

"…Merciful."

Harry, whose body had started shaking at some point during their kiss and hadn't stopped yet, finally reached his limit. Already so weak from his weeks of imprisonment, he could no longer remain standing. His knees buckled, and he fell.

Before he could hit the ground, Voldemort caught him, and though Harry wished he could shove him away, he knew the fight was futile. He had no physical strength left.

"I want to talk to him," he demanded despite this, deciding that the best way to respond to the fact that Voldemort had just kissed him in the most horrifying fashion was to not acknowledge it at all. "Let me talk to Ron. He won't—he'll never surrender on his own, but… I might be able to convince him."

Voldemort's magic shifted strangely, as if he was both perplexed but also pleased. "And why would you do that, Harry?"

"Because I don't want my best friend to die in Azkaban," Harry answered. His head was swimming, but he forced himself to focus. He wanted Voldemort's word before he inevitably passed out again. "Let me talk to him before his trial. If… If I can guarantee that Hermione will live if he surrenders, then I'm sure I can talk him into it."

Voldemort's aura darkened again. "Hermione Granger deserves *death*," he hissed.

"No." Harry looked him in the eye. "If Ron lives *and* Hermione lives, then… then I live."

He knew at once that he had said the right thing. Voldemort's face gave away no emotion whatsoever, but his magic, which Harry was still able to sense so aptly, betrayed him. It whirled with vigor, glimmering with hints of gold in a desirous, happy way.

Voldemort wanted Harry to want to live far more than he wanted Ron to be imprisoned or Hermione to die.

Yet his expression remained blank. "We shall see," Voldemort said. He pulled Harry to his chest, holding him like a parent might hold a small child.

As mortifying as that was, Harry couldn't do anything to stop it. "You have to let me talk to him," he continued adamantly as Voldemort stood, cradling him in his arms. "You have to, you—"

"In the morning. His trial is at noon. I shall allow you to speak with him before then. At this time, you are too weak to stand, let alone convince anyone that they should be changing their morals for the promise of life. You are both physically and magically exhausted. You need rest."

Harry nearly laughed at that. He was just about to say something that would have surely gotten him into trouble again—something along the lines of how Dumbledore was right, Tom Riddle really *was* one of the most brilliant minds in the world, to be able to see *that*—but thankfully, he never got the chance.

"Sleep."

Instantly, Harry did.

Chapter End Notes

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Ruby Red

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Silk.

Harry awoke on a soft surface, surrounded by smooth, velvety fabric. His hands slid against the sheets as he raised them to his face, yawning groggily.

He felt… *good.*

Better than he had in days—physically, at least. Harry rubbed his eyes with the back of his hands and opened them. He briefly took in his surroundings before glancing up at the ceiling.

He screamed.

Not because he was in some horror-filled dungeon with chains that might come to life and torture him. Not because there was a sinister Dark Lord waiting there, glaring with piercing red eyes and fury in his heart.

No. In fact, Harry was in a luxurious room, one which he assumed must have been yet another part of Malfoy Manor. The walls were covered in a minimal, deep green wallpaper; the furniture was a rich mahogany. It was a space that was exuberantly decadent and rich.

The sight which had caused him to shout was not Voldemort… but *himself.*

The surface above the four-poster bed on which he slept was a giant mirror. Harry was looking up at *himself,* and it was an extremely unsettling sight to see upon waking. His face, jaw, and neck were still covered in dried blood. His hair was even wilder than it usually was—longer than he'd ever had it before and looking like he'd just stepped out of a windstorm.

But those features were nothing at all compared to his eyes.

Red.

Vibrant, ruby red.

Harry screamed, because even though he had seen them through the Dark Lord's mind before, he had been in denial… and he had assumed that, if and when he was given his sight back, they would be returned to normal.

He was wrong.

Harry sat up quickly and stood, the blood rushing to his head and making him dizzy. He was about to stand when the door on the other side of the room opened.

Narcissa Malfoy stood in the doorway. Her magic was just as beautiful, visually, as Harry might have imagined: a deep, saturated navy that glimmered slightly. Yet at the moment it was withered, echoing the look of fear and concern on her face. The moment Harry smiled when they made eye contact, and a tidal wave of relief washed over him.

Narcissa rushed over and quickly enveloped him in an embrace.

"You're all right," they both said at the same time. Harry laughed into her shoulder, all thoughts of his eyes momentarily forgotten.

"He didn't do anything to you? Or to Draco? He didn't—"

"No." Narcissa answered him without letting go. "No, he did not say or do anything to me, I'm fine—but Draco?" She paused, and her magic swelled with alarm. "Why would you ask that, did Draco do something, did—"

"No," Harry lied at once. He couldn't tell her the truth of his concern for her son. Harry had feared that Voldemort might have taken it out on him personally after Harry nearly killed himself with his own magic, considering that Draco was supposed to be watching him. He was both shocked and relieved to hear that this was not the case. "Draco didn't do anything at all, I just worried that he might do something to him, instead…"

Harry didn't need to explain any further than that. Voldemort had already used her son as a means to punish his parents before.

Narcissa's magic darkened with a great and powerful *spite*. Harry almost gasped at the intensity of it; he had never felt such an overwhelming hatred coming from her before.

Hatred… for *Voldemort.*

The frightening sensation vanished nearly the moment he felt it. Narcissa's magic transitioned back into a much lighter hue, no longer hostile but full of anxiety.

"But what has he done to *you*, what—"

"Nothing," Harry said. "He didn't do anything, just… gave me my sight back. Obviously."

"Yes, I was informed, thank goodness. I had been at the Ministry, with Lucius—making appearances, being seen with the right people and making sure to be in the right photographs alongside my husband—it's *exhausting*, politics—but I was suddenly ordered to return here, to tend to you…"

She finally released him. Narcissa stepped away just far enough so that she could look at his face, but kept her hands on his shoulders. "Oh, child," she sighed. Her eyes were so sad, and her magic was heavy with empathy. "Things have… It's… Your friend, he—"

"I know." Harry, said, his voice breaking. "I know about Ron. Your son told me." He then jumped, startling Narcissa so badly that she dropped her arms. He looked wildly about the room for a clock—noticing only then that his own watch was missing. "What time is it? His trial—it's at noon, he said—"

"It's early. It's only eight."

"Where is Vol—the Dark Lord?"

Narcissa exhaled, ignoring his near use of the Dark Lord's name. "Not here," she said. She put a hand on his shoulder again, like she might be able to quell his worry with a touch. "He said he needed to tend to something, but that he would be back within the hour. And that… that he wanted you to be awake and prepared to leave at that time. I was just on my way to wake you when I heard you scream." Her expression became concerned again. "Why is there…?"

Her voice trailed off, seemingly unable to ask why there was blood all over his mouth and neck, and why his eyes were still… wrong.

Harry's stomach churned. "Um," he started, and his face began to burn. "I, ah. Bit my tongue."

Narcissa stared. Harry didn't bother elaborating on his pathetic lie that, horrifically enough, had a ring of truth to it. "And I don't know why my…"

Apparently Harry could not put that into words, either. Narcissa stood up straighter, sweeping her long, blonde hair behind her back and clearing her throat. "Well," she said, her voice crisp. "Let's just get you cleaned up then, shall we?"

Harry just nodded and let her mother him.

Half an hour later, and Harry almost looked like a normal human being again.

Narcissa had showed him to a bathroom that was adjacent to the room he'd slept in. It was so lavish it was gaudy, with a white marble floor and tiled walls that looked like they were flecked with diamonds. The tub was enormous, but Harry wasn't in the mood for lazing around in suds, even if he was sure the basin would have filled in moments.

Showering after all that he had been through felt like paradise. The warm water was heaven against his skin, washing away the blood, sweat, and grime in a way that cleaning charms just couldn't quite accomplish.

Afterwards, Harry found a set of very slick and expensive looking robes that Narcissa had left for him, folded up neatly on a vanity. They were entirely black, with bright, silver buckles. He put them on, and was unsurprised to find that they were a bit loose around the waist and shoulders, even though the length was about right. It wasn't until after he was fully dressed that Harry realized they must belong to Draco.

Once fully clothed, Narcissa returned. She took one look at him and beamed, but there was a strange determination in her magic that made Harry uneasy.

"Here, sit," she said, gesturing towards the chair in front of the vanity. Nervously, Harry did. He looked at Narcissa in the mirror, not wanting to pay attention to the scarlet eyes of his own reflection.

"Stay still," she instructed. "I'm going to attempt to fix your hair. It dearly needs a trim."

Harry laughed. "Determined to be disappointed, are you?" he said. She

narrowed her eyes at him, looking offended. Clearly, Narcissa had no idea what she was going up against. "No, please. By all means, give it a go. Witches who cared for me and my appearance far more than you have tried and failed."

"I doubt that," she murmured. Harry didn't have time to appreciate how much that touched him before she started, trimming off the longer, more unruly bits.

Harry watched her work in deepest amusement. While her expression remained the same—fiercely focused—her magic revealed just how irritated she was becoming. It gradually became more and more frazzled as, no matter how much she trimmed or how she tried to comb it, his hair continued to defy her.

She eventually caught his eye in the mirror, frowning when she saw him grinning. "Funny, is it?" she said, just before casting a wordless spell in desperation. Harry felt a kind of tingling on his scalp, and watched, in utmost fascination, as his the part that she had targeted sprung up *more.*

"Does it *ever* lie flat?"

Harry grinned merrily. "Absolutely never."

Narcissa pursed her lips, looking like she was trying to think of another plan of attack—but then she shrugged and pocketed her wand, admitting defeat. "You know," she said, running her fingers through it—an action which did nothing at all to help its appearance but which Harry found pleasant all the same, “I think I kind of like it."

Harry was baffled. "Yes, I do," she said more firmly. "It's kind of nice, being wild like that. It just sort of screams *defiant.*"

"Is *that* the message I want my appearance to be screaming, these days?"

"Well, no," Narcissa admitted, though she was smirking despite herself. "But it suits you." She stepped away and motioned for Harry to stand. "Follow me. He'll be back soon, and you're to be in the foyer when he arrives."

Whatever temporary respite Harry had been experiencing from the horror of his reality died with that statement. The smile slid from his face as he stood, bracing himself to see Voldemort again—and if the Dark Lord was true to his word… *Ron.*

Malfoy manor was *enormous.*

Harry only came to this realization because the foyer was evidently located miles away. They walked down one corridor, turning only to walk down another, just to go down some stairs and then pass yet another hallway filled with doorways that led to Merlin knew where. Narcissa walked briskly, like she was very accustomed to this massive labyrinth of a home, and Harry kept falling behind, distracted by everything that was around him. Crystal wall sconces lit up every corner; paintings of landscapes and portraits of what were probably Malfoy ancestors watched them curiously from within their frames. At one point, they passed a large bay window, and Harry was stunned to see a beautiful garden filled with flowers, trees, and strutting, white peacocks.

Narcissa smiled when she caught him staring, rushing to catch up with her again. "Lucius enjoys them. I find them difficult to care for, myself," she said, in response to his unasked question concerning the albino birds in her yard.

Finally, after what felt like ages, they descended a wide staircase and arrived in what Harry was sure was the foyer. His heart sank at the sight.

This, here, was where Dobby had been stabbed to death by Bellatrix Lestrange…

Harry looked up at the glittering chandelier. It was perfectly intact now. Like it had not once crashed to the ground and shattered into thousands of fragments as Harry Potter and his friends escaped…

And Harry knew that he would never have such a savior as Dobby the house-elf ever again. Because Kreacher, he recalled with a rush of guilt, Kreacher was dead now, too…

Narcissa gently touched his shoulder but said nothing. Harry looked around the hall, trying to locate a fireplace or a door where Voldemort would conceivably appear. Narcissa noticed and shook her head.

"He will apparate," she said shortly. There was something about her tone and the way in which her magic darkened that made it perfectly clear that this was a very, very unwelcome ability which the Dark Lord had—to be able to apparate in and out of her home.

They didn't wait long.

Harry only knew he had arrived by the familiar feel of his magic. Voldemort's presence was a dark and sinister power, and he could sense it the second it was near.

Yet unlike any wizard or witch Harry had ever known, Voldemort didn't make a sound when he apparated. Narcissa was completely oblivious to his arrival in the foyer, as he had appeared somewhere behind them, and so Harry, too, feigned ignorance. His heart raced in anticipation.

"Narcissa… Harry."

Narcissa turned and immediately fell into a deep, deferential bow. Harry stood there, unsure of what he was supposed to do, but definitely not about to do *that*.

Voldemort's eyes were fixed singularly on Harry when he said, in a soft voice, "Leave us," though it was clear he was speaking to Narcissa. She stood and, with one fleeting, worrisome glance at Harry, ascended the staircase and left. Harry watched her go, missing the peacefulness of her aura before it had even fully gone.

Voldemort's focus never left Harry's face. His magic was especially energetic, convulsing with something that Harry couldn't decode. The golden flecks glinted like gleaming eyes between pockets of darkness.

But his face, his handsome, deceptive face, was completely blank. "Are you prepared to leave?"

"Yes," Harry answered, confident despite his nerves. "Where exactly are we going?"

"Azkaban."

It was a response that Harry was only partially prepared for. He'd known that's where Ron was, but he hadn't been sure if Voldemort was planning on taking him there or relocating his friend. He'd been hoping desperately for the latter.

It would seem that he was wrong. Again.

Before Harry could ask more of the many questions he had, Voldemort reached into his robe pocket. Harry’s mouth fell open in shock at what he revealed.

His Invisibility Cloak.

The Dark Lord raised his arm, and it took Harry a moment to comprehend that he was actually *offering it back to him.* "Take it," he said when Harry did nothing, certain that this must be a trap. "You are thought to be missing by the entire Wizarding World. I will not have you outside of these walls undisguised… Even if it is only prisoners who would see you."

Harry slowly reached forward and took the cloak. The silvery fabric felt cool against his skin, and he had to resist the urge to pull it to his chest like a child's beloved toy. He couldn't help but smile as he held it, this cherished belonging which he thought he would never see again.

"I will be taking you to the edge of the prison by apparation. Put the cloak on."

Harry was about to do that before he froze, a sudden wave of wrath rolling through him. "*My eyes*," he seethed. Voldemort's magic whirled, but his face and his stature remained impassive. "Why do they still look like this? Why are they… red?"

"Because I did not restore *your* abysmal eyesight. I graciously gave you sight like *mine*. Or has the fact that you have not needed your glasses failed to dawn on you yet?"

"I…" Harry started but then paused, his brows furrowing as he tried to discern just what it was Voldemort's magic was revealing that his face was not. It was shifting to some hue that was flavored with something sort of familiar, some emotion that Harry had sensed in him once before, when he'd been blind…

"…You're lying," Harry concluded, though he was still a bit unsure. "You could make them green again if you wanted to, they shouldn't have to be red just because you've fixed my vision—you're *Lord Voldemort*, you can do *anything*—"

Harry stopped speaking far too late, clapping a hand to his mouth like he could take saying his name back. To his great surprise, Voldemort did not look angry. In fact, his magic swelled with a jarring… pride? He was instantly, overwhelmingly *pleased*…

Harry might have laughed, if it weren't for the fact that the Dark Lord's expression was, contrastingly, cold and indifferent. But he wasn't. Voldemort was secretly so *pleased* that Harry had just acknowledged his magical *prowess,* so much so that he hadn't minded the casual use of his name at all.

Harry looked around, half-expecting Fenrir Greyback and his henchmen to appear and relive some new configuration of his last experience in this hall. When nothing happened, he looked at Voldemort, confused. "What happened to the Taboo…?"

"The Taboo Curse was removed from you," Voldemort said emotionlessly. When Harry's brows raised in disbelief, he went on, looking almost disappointed. "No one aside from my closest Death Eaters knows that you are being held here. If you had said my name during your imprisonment and triggered the Taboo, it could have led to… complications."

Harry took a moment to think about that, feeling like an idiot that it had never once occurred to him to try that. And he had said his name during that horrid meeting, and nothing had happened then, either…

"So only *I* can say your name without consequence," he muttered. "How fitting."

"Is that the conclusion you have come to?"

Voldemort's voice was perilously soft. Harry held the cloak closer to his chest, swallowing thickly and fighting the desire to back away. "That's not—I didn't—my *eyes*."

It wasn't an eloquent diversion, but it seemed to work. Voldemort's magic shifted in that semi-familiar way again, brightening. "You did this on purpose. *Why?* Why would you make them red, like yours…? In fact, why are *your* eyes still like that? You changed the rest of you, why not the most inhuman part?"

The statement had a profound effect. Voldemort's energy churned, and Harry realized what it was: *Shame.* The Dark Lord was *ashamed.* Also angry.

The second emotion was obvious by his expression, too. Harry spoke again before Voldemort could, the realization dawning on him. "You *can't* change them back, can you? You could change everything else, but not your eyes. You couldn't get them back to normal, so you just—you just decided that if *you* had to have crazy, red eyes, *I* did, too."

The spike in fury and embarrassment that manifested in Voldemort's aura confirmed it. Harry was beside himself.

The Dark Lord was… He was like a toddler; a murderous, adult toddler, throwing the world's most dangerous and passive-aggressive

temper tantrum. And were it not for his newfound ability to sense magical auras, Harry would have never figured it out.

"Are you well versed in dark curses and their reversals, Harry?" Voldemort murmured, and though Harry knew that he was right in his accusation, the Dark Lord seemed keen on denying it. "Do you have any idea the intricate nature of what I did to blind you, and what I had to do to impart on you superior sight? Your corrected vision is a *gift."* He moved forward in a rapid, viper-like motion, making Harry's heart skip a beat. Harry could feel the heat of his breath on his face—no longer cold, no longer smelling of blood. "The very fact that you are standing here, with me, being allowed to go and speak with your friend and convince him to avoid a life of imprisonment and turmoil, is a *gift.* Or are you suddenly feeling ungrateful? Have you changed your mind, have you decided that Ronald Weasley deserves life in Azkaban… or worse?"

Harry shook his head, and he did back away this time. "N-no," he stuttered. "No, I d-don't think that—I just—how on earth am I supposed to convince him to listen to a single word I say, looking like this?"

Harry gestured towards his face. Voldemort looked unfazed. "If you take me there, and I talk to him, with *your* eyes—he'll think that you're *possessing* me, or something!" he shouted. "Which isn't unheard of," he added, spiteful.

"Stay under the cloak."

The Dark Lord said it like it was the most obvious solution in the world, one that he had already come up with. "I want you to stay invisible regardless. You didn't ask that he be able to see you, only that you be allowed to speak with him. He is aware that you have a cloak of invisibility, yes? So he should not find it so alarming that he cannot see you."

Harry opened his mouth to respond, but Voldemort held a hand up and continued. "You cannot go in the cell with him," he said, his tone much sharper. "You will not be able to touch him; he will not be able to approach the bars. If he asks why you will not remove the cloak, tell him that I commanded that you did not."

Harry was incensed. "Why not? Why won't I be able to touch him—he's just in a cell, isn't he?"

"You shall see."

Without warning, Voldemort grabbed Harry by the shoulders. Instantly, that buoyant light blossomed between them, warm and pleasant.

There was a short but powerful moment, then. Harry, holding his cloak, and Voldemort, with his fingers digging into his shoulders… but Harry saw it, in those seconds just before the Dark Lord pulled him away from Malfoy Manor, where Voldemort's eyes fluttered shut, almost blissfully, and his *magic*…

The blackness of his magic brightened and shimmered, and Harry could feel such an overwhelming sense of *relief* coming from him…

But then the moment was gone, and the two wizards vanished.

They appeared near the sea.

The smell of salt water hit Harry with a sharp intensity, and the wind whipped against his skin. He clutched the cloak to his chest as the fabric caught in the breeze. Voldemort released his shoulders and they turned as one to face the dark, desolate prison.

Harry had never seen Azkaban before, but it looked more sinister than even he could have imagined. It was huge, with black, brick walls, tall, wrought iron gates, and a nondescript set of double doors for the entryway. Harry could see tiny windows at set intervals high above, where he assumed the cells must be.

But there was one, very noticeable monstrosity missing.

"You don't use dementors anymore?" Harry asked, scanning the flat, gray sky for signs of darkness. He'd been mentally preparing himself for their presence, but there were none to be found.

"Of course we still use dementors. They are very loyal to me… I dismissed them from the island for the duration of your visit. They will return shortly."

Harry nodded, only mildly surprised…

And then an onslaught of cataclysmic revelations stormed his mind.

"Oh… my… God."

Harry smacked a hand to his forehead, covering his scar. *Of course* Voldemort would clear the whole damn island of dementors; the

creatures which *literally* sucked the souls out of people. Because he, Harry…

"*That's* the real reason why they've always affected me so badly," he said. He wasn't looking at Voldemort when he spoke, but up at the empty sky, gaping. "Not just because I have a bad past, *loads* of people have bad pasts, but because I… I have a whole soul, but then I also have an extra piece in me. I'm like—I'm like a full meal, with an extra side dish!"

Voldemort's magic whirled with a powerful emotion, and when Harry glanced at his face, it was to see that it was uncharacteristically mortified—*appalled* that Harry had just referred to a fragment of his soul as a *side dish*—but Harry's racing mind was already leading him to the next jarring realization. "And—and that memory, the one I always relive when they're near—I always thought it was weird, because I had never remembered it before—but that's not my memory, is it? That Halloween night."

Harry stared at Voldemort with giant, accusatory eyes. "It's *yours*."

Voldemort's thunderstruck expression quickly turned into one which was void of emotion. His magic became eerily still, a stagnant cloud of blackness, and Harry could hardly see any of the recently acquired gold glinting in it. "…You are wasting your time," he eventually said, ignoring Harry's words and looking towards the prison. "I will accompany you to where he is. Ronald Weasley is being kept in a high-security cell in the east tower. You are to keep your cloak on at all times. Put it on now."

"Wait." Harry shook his head, and though his mind was still reeling from all he'd just comprehended, he forced himself to focus on the task at hand. *Ron.* "What… What can I say to him?"

Voldemort tilted his head to one side, one brow arched. "And here I was, assuming that you had some idea of what to say in order to convince him to submit."

"I know what I *want* to say," Harry snapped. "If I can tell him that by surrendering and saying whatever you want him to that Hermione will live, then I'm sure I can get him to agree. But I need to know you'll do that. I need to know you'll spare her."

Voldemort's aura became so bitter and black that it nearly resembled what it had looked like days before, when Harry had first perceived it. "You may tell him that if he surrenders and is complacent, that it will

greatly increase the likelihood that Hermione Granger will be allowed to live."

"No." Harry refused to compromise, though Voldemort's hatred towards Hermione was deeply unsettling. Had something else happened, to make the Dark Lord's ire towards her so catastrophic? Or was it simply because she was a muggle-born and Harry's friend?

Harry's wasn't sure, but he wasn't about to ask. "Hermione *has* to be allowed to live. You *need* to give me your word."

"I do not *need* to do *anything*, Harry," Voldemort hissed, his eyes brightening threateningly. A particularly strong breeze whipped past, making the Dark Lord's cloak billow and his hair disheveled, as though even the weather conformed to Voldemort's will. "My mercy is not limitless and my patience is waning. Either you take the offer I have made you and you speak to him now, or we leave this moment and you damn them both. *Make your choice.*"

Harry scowled, glaring despite how frightening the Dark Lord was when he was angry. It wasn't much of an option. Harry clenched his teeth and pulled the cloak around his shoulders. "Let's go, then," he muttered.

Voldemort nodded, his vicious magic lessening into something a bit more satisfied. He turned towards the prison and started walking, motioning for Harry to follow. "Stay near me," he said, and Harry felt a thrill of terror sweep up his spine when, despite the fact that he had the cloak on and they had moved, Voldemort looked directly into his eyes and added, "I will know if you are not."

Harry barely had time to contemplate how he had done that before they reached the tall, black doors. They slowly swung open when they approached, like they recognized the Dark Lord by his presence alone.

The space within was ominously dark. Harry swallowed hard, bracing himself to enter into the place where his Godfather had suffered for so many years…

Voldemort crossed the threshold without hesitating. Harry quickly did the same, following the Dark Lord into Azkaban.

Chapter End Notes

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Hermione's Flight

The temperature within the prison was significantly colder than it was outside, which only added to the disturbing atmosphere of Azkaban. The doors swung shut once they'd entered, and the darkness surrounded them—shadows punctuated only by slivers of light which streamed in through the small windows.

Despite the all-encompassing bleakness, it took only a moment for Harry's eyes to adjust. As they ascended a narrow staircase to the first of the cells, Harry couldn't help but appreciate just how… *focused* everything looked, so much clearer than anything had ever appeared to him prior to the loss of his vision. There was texture in the walls that he doubted he would ever have noticed before, and there were flecks of dust floating in the gray light from the windows that he was sure he'd never have been able to perceive.

He could see extraordinarily well… but Harry wasn't about to start feeling *grateful.* Excellent vision wasn't worth the loss of the only trait he had inherited from his mother.

Harry was struck with a sudden flood of sadness. A memory—a rather recent one, in which he had stood in the Forbidden Forest, surrounded by the apparitions of his mother, his father, Sirius, and Remus—appeared to him. They had stood at his side, acting like corporal patronuses to stave off the dementors which hovered between him and the Dark Lord…

You've been so brave.

We are… so proud of you.

Harry had gone to die, dropping the ring to the forest floor before facing Voldemort alone; their loving praise the only thing which had given him the courage to face what he must do…

Only he had failed. Harry had failed them, he had failed everyone… He was alive…

The sharp sound of a woman's sob made Harry jump. For a wild moment, he thought he might turn to see the ghost of his mother, crying for her son's tragic life…

Who he saw instead made his blood run cold.

Professor McGonagall.

Harry's former head of house was practically unrecognizable. She was huddled on the floor in the furthest corner of her cell, as far away from the gates as possible. Her knees were pulled to her chest, and her dark hair was disheveled and matted.

The sobbing sound which she had made must have been a result of peering up through the bleakness and seeing what looked like a young Tom Riddle walking past. Harry had just opened his mouth to call out to her when Voldemort's magic suddenly rose with a sharp and angry energy.

Harry stood there, flustered and overwhelmed. Voldemort stopped too, somehow knowing that Harry was no longer following him closely. He was waiting, and even without turning to face him Harry sensed his impatience so strongly that he could practically taste it. The gold flecks within his magic glinted like pointed shards of glass.

Voldemort's power was as beautiful as it was terrifying.

Harry took one last look at his former professor, wishing that he could will some courage into her, that she could feel his presence and hear his silent vow:

I will get you out of there.

Harry turned and resumed trailing after the Dark Lord.

Voldemort walked quicker after that, perhaps in an attempt to make sure Harry's eyes couldn't linger long enough on any of the other cells to notice who their occupants might be. It wasn't long before they made it to the far side of the second-floor corridor, at the end of which was another narrow staircase, though rather than going straight up, this one curved. It reminded Harry of the stairs which led to the Headmaster's office in Hogwarts.

Voldemort stopped. He grabbed Harry by the shoulders and pulled him close enough that their chests were touching. Harry hardly had time to register that he'd been ensnared before the Dark Lord was speaking quietly in his ear through the silvery fabric of the cloak.

"There is only one cell at the top of this tower. You will find him there. You have ten minutes."

Voldemort released him. Harry's heart was thundering in his chest, but

the Dark Lord merely took two steps back and stood against the wall, his wand in his hand. He closed his eyes and raised his hands in front of him, almost as if he had begun to pray.

Another memory struck Harry. Lord Voldemort, in this exact same position, on the other side of a fire…

How extremely different such a pose looked in the form of Tom Riddle.

Except this *was* Lord Voldemort, Harry screamed at himself, and he had just told Harry that he had ten minutes—*ten minutes!*—in which to talk to Ron, and he had probably already begun to count down the seconds he had left.

Despite how badly Harry wanted to argue for more time, he knew that would be both fruitless and stupid. If he so much as spoke loud enough that there was a possibility someone might hear his voice, he was certain that Voldemort would disapparate with him right then and there.

Harry grit his teeth and dashed up the stairs.

It wasn't his smartest decision, running. The tower was much taller than he had anticipated, and Harry hadn't actually moved much in the past several weeks. He only made it ten steps before he started to feel dizzy with overexertion. Scowling and hating how weak he'd become, Harry slowed his pace. He wondered vaguely what would happen if he passed out in the stairwell. Would Voldemort hold that against him, seeing as it was *his* fault he was so weak in the first place?

Probably.

Forcing that thought aside, Harry carried on. By the time he reached the top of the stairs, he was breathing heavily and feeling a bit woozy.

The sight of Ron sobered his mind in an instant.

There he was, directly in front of him, the iron bars of his cell just ten feet away. Horror and disbelief gripped at Harry's heart.

Nothing could have prepared him for this.

Ron wasn't sitting in a cell like McGonagall had been. He was on the ground with his back up against a wall, tethered to the stones. He was held there not in the way in which Harry had been when he'd initially

arrived at Malfoy manor, but by in an even more disturbing way. Around Ron's neck was a thick, metal band which curved around his throat, coming out of the wall and pinning him to it—a silver collar so tight against his skin that Harry wondered if he could breathe properly. Currently, he was staring out of the one small, barred window which was high above him, giving him only the barest glimpse of the outside world. His gaze was vacant.

Harry swallowed thickly and approached the bars. Whether or not Ron heard him, Harry couldn't tell. His empty, blue eyes never left the window.

Harry took a deep breath before saying, in as calm a voice as he could manage, "*Ron.*"

Ron's whole body twitched. The massive collar around his neck flashed a brilliant red, and Harry winced at the same time that Ron did. It obviously hurt him when he moved too suddenly.

Lord Voldemort certainly was not taking any chances when it came to the imprisonment of Harry Potter's best friend.

"Sorry!" Harry said, feeling confident that here, at least, he could speak without fearing that anyone could hear him. As that thought struck him, he wondered why that was the case. Why had Voldemort not ascended the staircase with him, so that he could hear what Harry and Ron said?

Harry forced the question away, unwilling to waste time lingering on why Lord Voldemort did any of the things that he did. One could spend a lifetime doing that, and at the moment, Harry had only ten minutes.

"Sorry, sorry!" Harry repeated. The metal collar returned to its previous silver. Ron was staring in Harry's general direction, his eyes wide and his chest heaving. "Ron, it's me—it's me, Harry!"

For a long moment, Ron did nothing but stare. Harry's heart dropped when he saw just how ashen and bruised his friend's face was, like he'd stepped out of a violent battle and had been tossed in Azkaban directly afterwards.

Then, much to Harry's surprise, Ron lifted one shaky hand to his forehead and started laughing.

"Holy shit," he murmured between breaths. "Oh, bloody hell. I've only

been here for a few days, and I'm already mad."

"You're not mad!" Harry said, caught between being irritated and irrationally amused. Ron had said it in such a casual way, so jokingly. The tone of voice he might have used when they were talking in the common room about how horrible Potions class was, or how much they would rather be out playing Quidditch than writing essays.

"You're not mad, it's really me, Harry—I'm right here, under the cloak!"

"Sure you are," Ron said hoarsely, smiling. "And I'm Romilda Vane, I just took some Polyjuice Potion on accident. So I shouldn't even be here, really. You can go ahead and cancel the trial for Ronald Weasley if you'd like."

"Ron! I mean it! I'm here, and I don't have much time to talk to you, so quit wasting it by being in denial!"

The sloppy grin slid from Ron's face. "All right then," he said seriously, though Harry could tell he was still unbelieving. "Prove it. Tell me some things that only Harry would know, because I'm pretty sure that Harry is dead and I'm about to follow suit."

"Your patronus is a dog, I taught you how to cast one," Harry said.

Ron shrugged as well as he could with his constraints. "That's easy, lots of people probably know that. Go again."

"I was in the common room with you after you asked Fleur Delacour to the Yule Ball in our fourth year. We both failed abysmally at getting dates that day. We bonded over being mortified."

Ron snorted, but shook his head—again, an action which was pained and constricted. "Lots of people heard about that. The whole school, in fact. Something else."

Harry tugged at his hair, incensed. "I was there when you had a bunch of bloody basilisk fangs in your hands, having apparently opened the Chamber of Secrets by fumbling your way through parseltongue. You mentioned saving the house-elves. Hermione threw herself at you, and I witnessed my best friends snogging in the middle of a war."

Ron's expression became slack. "What did I say?" he murmured. "When you kindly reminded us that a war was going on, what was my response?"

Harry's lip twitched. "I know, mate," he said, feeling absurdly emotional as he repeated Ron's response word for word. "So it's now or never, isn't it?"

Ron looked away, back up towards the window, but Harry could see his eyes glistening. "Merlin," he muttered. "Are you… I don't… How are you here, if you really are here, Harry? I thought… We were so sure that you went off into the forest after all, because he… he told you to, to sacrifice yourself…"

"I didn't die. But… that is what I went to do, yes," Harry admitted. Ron closed his eyes and exhaled a long breath. Harry's mind raced, trying to figure out a way to make Ron believe him without damning him further. Surely, if he told Ron that he was a human horcrux, Voldemort would not hesitate to kill him after all. "I went to him so that he would stop the fighting. I thought he was going to kill me. He didn't. I've been in Malfoy Manor ever since, locked in one of those cells like we were before."

Ron looked dumbstruck. "But…*why?"*

"I guess he decided that I would be more useful to him alive than dead."

"Take the cloak off, so I can see you," Ron commanded, clearly still skeptical.

"I can't," Harry responded. "He demanded that I don't. It was the only way he would let me talk to you at all."

"*Why?"*

"I don't know, I don't understand much at all about his choices! If I did, neither of us would be here! But right now, you-know-who is… He's waiting outside the prison, and he said I have ten minutes to talk to you. Less than that by now."

"So *that's* why the dementors were cleared out…" Ron glanced up at the window again. "Did—did you know dementors can talk, Harry?"

Harry was admittedly surprised by that. "Er… No, I didn't."

Ron laughed, and it was a disconcertingly high and giddy sound. "Oh, *yeah.* They sure can. They've been hovering around my window a lot. They know that I'm about to be offed, given to one of them, I'm sure. They've been whispering sweet nothings. I think they're fighting over

me." He laughed again. "I've never been more popular!"

"Ron! Snap out of it, this is serious. You *need* to listen to me!"

"Right, sure. Sorry, it's just that their absence has me feeling a bit slap-happy. Obviously, seeing as I'm having a conversation with Harry Potter."

"You *are* having a conversation with Harry Potter!" Harry seethed. "And I'm here to tell you that if you want Hermione to have a chance at surviving at all, you need to surrender at the trial later today. You need to say that—that you were wrong, that everything we believed in before was wrong, and that you see the error of your ways or whatever. You need to side with him, Ron, or Hermione and you are both doomed."

"Ha! Now I *know* I'm fucking imagining this. Because Harry would never say to give up, and because Hermione, if she is ever caught, is *absolutely* doomed, no matter what I say or do."

"I *would* say to give in, and I *am*, considering the circumstances," Harry said, feeling heavy with guilt. "Ron, listen. I'm being held prisoner by the Dark Lord. He's won. I hate that, and I know you do too, but that doesn't mean we stop fighting completely. I just… I *need* you two to live. *I need you*."

Harry's voice trembled and broke. Ron's face became serious again, and Harry thought that maybe he was starting to believe that he was really there. "If you surrender and comply with whatever he wants, if you answer whatever questions he has, then he'll spare Hermione," Harry went on. "I know I can convince him to, I just… I need you to do what he says, first."

"Why on earth would he listen to *you?"* Ron shifted so that he was facing the gates as much as he could. "Harry, why would he *kidnap* you when all he ever wanted to do was *kill* you?"

"I… Like I said, he plans on using me. To get the rest of those who fought on the Order's side to turn, eventually. Like… like a weapon."

Harry could see the conversation they'd had from years ago storm Ron's memory. His face turned a delicate shade of green. "But why would he listen to you? Why do you think you could convince him of anything? Especially sparing Hermione… There's no way he'll do that. Not after what happened."

Harry's stomach dropped. He was afraid to ask, but knew he had to. "What happened?"

"Ah, Harry. It was a *real* mess," Ron answered, and smiled again. "We were in the Forbidden Forest when it all went down, just the other day… Was that two days ago? I don't even know anymore. The day that you-know-who publicly announced that he was the new Head of the Wizengamot on the WWN."

"*What?"*

"Oh? You haven't heard?" Ron asked lightly, as if this was a perfectly ordinary conversation. "He made himself the Chief Warlock just the other day. And Hermione and I, we were all over the place, looking for you for days on end, and that just really set her off. She'd already been such a wreck, worse even than I was… She never slept, just feverishly researched things, trying to think of places you may have gone… Both of us were refusing to believe that you had sacrificed yourself and were dead, even though we both knew it had to be true… Because you would never just run off like that without us, and…"

He paused, blinking away tears. "But I'm not dead," Harry intervened. "Ron, please. My time is running out. Tell me what happened."

"After we listened to that broadcast, Hermione kind of lost it. She said that we needed to do something more proactive. So we went to the Forbidden Forest."

Harry gaped. "Why on earth would you go anywhere *near* Hogwarts?"

"To interview the centaurs, of course!" Ron said in brightest tones of sarcasm. "Excellent idea, I know! But she was convinced that maybe one of them had seen something, that if you had gone into the woods, they probably would have noticed, and…"

He sighed. "So we went. It felt like we had nothing else to lose. We went to the forest and found the centaurs, and… and we thought for sure that they were on our side. Really."

"Weren't they?" Harry asked. He specifically recalled centaurs fighting Death Eaters at the battle…

"Not all of them, apparently," Ron muttered scathingly. "Maybe they all were at some point, and you-know-who just got to them before we did. Maybe he convinced a few to act as spies, in case we ever thought to reenter the castle grounds. We were talking to this one who seemed

like he genuinely wanted to help us when another—this dark-haired asshole—completely stabbed us in the back."

"How?"

"By triggering the Taboo, of course," Ron said. "He just looked right at us, smiling all smugly, and said *his* name."

Harry's hand clenched into a fist at his side. He was certain that it was Bane. "That bastard," he hissed.

"But wait, there's more," Ron continued airily. "So that centaur says *that,* and there was this split second of just silence and horror—pure suspended disbelief, if you will—and then, just before the Snatchers appear, Hermione grabs my shoulder, looks me in the eyes, and says, 'I'm pregnant.'"

Harry was certain he'd misheard him. He waited for Ron to say something else to disprove what he'd just declared. When he didn't, Harry finally asked for confirmation himself.

"…Are you *kidding* me, Ron?"

Ron laughed weakly. "Nope! Hermione's pregnant. Unless she was lying, but I don't know why she would make something like *that* up and tell me right then if it wasn't true."

"Hermione is… pregnant," Harry repeated blankly. "And… and it's yours?"

"Well damn, Harry, I hope so. Otherwise that's just one more layer of misery and woe to add to the pile of shit that is my life."

Harry's mind raced, trying and failing to do simple math. "What—but how—*when* did you two…? God, were you two—were you *shagging* in the forest or something while I was asleep? Was I *in the tent* when it was happening!?"

"What? No, I—we—" Ron stuttered himself into silence, blushing but looking incredulous. He nearly made eye contact with Harry when he said, "Really, mate? *That's* what you want to focus on right now? Precisely when I lost my virginity?"

Harry took a deep breath. "No. I do not want to focus on that. You're right, it's just… God, couldn't you have used some kind of *protection?"*

"It was sort of a heat of the moment thing. What can I say? I'm a Weasley. We're a very potent bunch."

"For *fuck's sake*, Ron!"

Ron laughed again, clearly still giddy from the lack of dementors. "Ah, but I haven't told you the *best* part of the story. Because normally I'd think that Hermione being pregnant in today's day and age could only be a tragedy, really, but I'm actually glad. I don't think she would have left me, otherwise. I think she had to tell me then, because… because she just needed to explain herself, to justify running…"

Ron hurriedly wiped his eyes. "I'm so glad that she ran."

"Ron… What happened after the Snatchers appeared?"

"Mayhem, fire, and bloodshed," Ron said dramatically, though Harry could tell he really meant it. "And they appeared *fast,* too; you-know-who must have had portkeys prepared in case he ever got wind that we came onto Hogwarts grounds. So, Hermione told me that she was pregnant, and I didn't even have time to process it—she just grabbed my arm and we started running, trying to make it to the edge of where the anti-apparition ward was—and then, next thing you know, Yaxley is to our left and Bellatrix Lestrange is to our right, alongside a dozen Snatchers."

Harry cringed. Ron wasn't finished. "Of course we fought. But we were outnumbered right from the beginning, not to mention just who we were fighting against… Bellatrix went straight for Hermione, and I sort of threw myself in the way, firing off some crazy, spark-like spells that I didn't even know I knew, like I was trying to be a dazzling, human distraction—I think I even did some serious damage to a few Death Eaters too—and it worked, getting their focus off of Hermione for a minute. She was able to get further away, and Bellatrix had to put some crazy hex on me to get me to stop lighting trees on fire. I have no idea what it was, but it made my whole body freeze up, and she grabbed me with one hand around the neck, her wand up against my throat… Or her new wand, I suppose, seeing as Hermione has hers. Oh!" Ron snapped his fingers suddenly, his eyes widening. "That's probably why she went straight for Hermione like that. Because she pretended to be her, and has her wand, too… Just like I have Pettigrew's and you have Draco's, right Harry? Ha…"

"I don't have any wand anymore," Harry muttered.

"Well right, I wouldn't imagine that you do—I just meant that it's sort

of funny, how we all were fighting Death Eaters with their own weapons… And the animosity towards Bellatrix is pretty mutual with Hermione. You know that scar on her arm? The one Bellatrix carved there with that cursed knife in Malfoy manor?"

Harry nodded—he recalled that day very well—until he remembered that Ron could not see him. "Yeah," he said quietly. "Of course I do."

"I would catch her up at night sometimes, in the days after you disappeared. Scratching at it, like she was trying to peel off her skin. She tried everything to get that damn thing off. She never could."

Ron fell silent for a moment, his gaze drifting up towards the window again.

"…Ron, tell me the rest of what happened, please. I don't have much longer."

Ron blinked dazedly. "Ah, sure. Back to the riveting tale of the end of my life. So, Bellatrix Lestrange has me in a choke hold, and the other Snatchers are looking for Hermione, and… and then this insanely dark, powerful curse comes hurling towards us. At Bellatrix precisely. And when I say dark, I mean *dark,* Harry. It was like a wave of pure, female spite that came barreling towards us. It would have killed Bellatrix if it hit her, I'm sure of it. I think it may have been the same curse that Snape used on George, actually, when he lost his ear. *Dark.*"

He laughed feebly. "I never really appreciated just how much Hermione studies everything before, you know? I think she's been looking into some very questionable stuff when we've had our backs turned, Harry. And that bag! I never asked what all she had in that enchanted bag of hers, but I should have."

"Ron," Harry hissed impatiently. *"Time."*

"Right, right. Sorry. So this curse would have killed Bellatrix I think, and she could have avoided it completely if she would have just released her hold on me—but she wouldn't. Instead she sort of stepped away, and—and the curse cut her arm clean off."

Harry's jaw dropped. Ron laughed in that delirious manner again. "And that bitch *still* wouldn't let me go! Her fucking decapitated arm didn't just stop working, like one might imagine; in fact, her grip actually got *tighter*—even though she, personally, was howling in pain. I guess that's how badly she wanted to follow her master's orders. We were supposed to be caught alive, otherwise she probably would have

just used me as a human shield. But she'd rather lose a fucking limb than go against you-know-who's instructions. Anyway, Hermione didn't kill her or save me, but she did get her revenge in a way. Bellatrix scarred Hermione's arm. Hermione cut hers off."

Harry was gaping again, trying to imagine this scene: Ron being held in place by a decapitated arm while Bellatrix Lestrange screamed in agony, literally detached from it.

"That was when you-know-who showed up."

Harry felt the blood drain from his face, even though this was just a retelling of a story that had already happened. "And we could only tell it was him because there was a mention of his altered appearance on the broadcast that morning, and because he still has those crazy, red eyes. Hermione showed herself then, and it was obvious she had waited for him to arrive. She was looking right at him, and she had her wand in one hand, with this sparkling curse sort of hovering over the tip of it, and something else in her other hand that she was holding above her head. A phoenix feather."

"A *phoenix feather?* Where did she get a *phoenix feather?"*

"I don't know!" Ron shouted. "I don't have any idea how or when she got it, but thank Merlin that she did! And you have to imagine what it looked like, Harry. She was holding a phoenix feather up high, and you could just see it, clear as day, almost like she'd purposefully made it stand out—and maybe she had—the word 'Mudblood', right across her arm. Then she flicked her wand and the curse that had been waiting there floated towards us, and she disappeared in a big ball of phoenix flames. Which is, you know. Sort of Dumbledore's thing. She just dropped that bomb and left."

"I'll say," Harry muttered in awe as he tried to visualize it. Hermione, wearing her scar like a banner and disappearing in a fashion that would have made Albus Dumbledore proud… all while looking Lord Voldemort right in the face.

No *wonder* Voldemort wanted her dead so badly.

"No, I meant literally. That's what that sparkly curse was. A massive, delayed *'bombardo'*. But you-know-who recognized it at once, because he threw up a shielding spell right away, protecting those who were closest to him, including me and the Death Eaters. But my God, Harry. She must have taken out a fourth of the forest. Obviously she was hoping it kill us all with that curse. And it would have worked, I bet,

if she had used it the way that we intended it to be used, rather than delayed like that."

"What do you mean, the way that you intended for it to be used?"

"As a self-destruction technique, of course," Ron said casually. "We agreed days ago that if it looked like we were going to get captured again, we would sooner die and take them with us. Because death would be better than…"

He gestured dismally around at the cell. He didn't need to finish his statement. "But she ran, and I'm positive she wouldn't have done it like that if she wasn't pregnant. I'm… I'm actually happy. I'm happy to let a dementor suck out my soul if it means Hermione lives. Course, I suppose her chances of staying alive for much longer are pretty slim…"

Harry's heart ached at the emotion in Ron's voice. "You're not going to have your soul sucked out, Ron, and Hermione *can* live… You just have to tell the Dark Lord whatever he wants to know at your trial, and you have to surrender."

"Tell the Dark Lord whatever he wants to know? Like where Hermione went?" Ron scoffed. "Even if I did know—and I would never say anything if I did, I don't care if they force veritaserum down my throat —I can't. I have no idea where she is, Harry… thankfully."

"Well," Harry said hesitantly, preparing himself for the backlash. "He… They might expect you to sort of pin it all on her, Ron. To make it seem like Hermione was the one to make you choose the 'wrong side', or whatever."

Ron scoffed again. "Yeah, I was offered that lovely little option last night by the *Minister*. I won't do that, Harry. I won't make up some bullshit story about how Hermione is a devious muggle-born who manipulated me into falling in love with her and doing whatever she said, or something. I won't."

Harry's heart sank, but at the same time, he could hardly argue. "I don't blame you," he admitted. "I would never do that to you or Hermione either."

"So that's it, then," Ron concluded, clapping his hands together. "I'm going to go to trial, be found guilty, and get the Dementor's Kiss."

"No," Harry said. "The very worst you'll be sentenced to is life in

Azkaban, but—"

"Even better!"

"—Ron, please, I think it will be much, much less than that if you at least surrender. Don't go along with the whole 'It's all Hermione's fault' thing, but just—say that you were wrong, that you were both wrong, and that you swear fealty to the Ministry of Magic and whatever else. Please, Ron. You have to. Think about what will happen if you don't. You have your family to think about. You have Hermione to think about, and this is the only way to give her even a chance to live…" Harry paused for a moment, amazed that the words were leaving his mouth even as he said them. "…You have a future child to think about, now."

"Don't say that." Ron's bruised face paled significantly. "Don't—just don't."

"It's true, though. If you want even the slightest chance at *anyone* you care about having a life, then you have to surrender. Please, Ron. Do it for them. Do it for me."

Right at that moment, Harry's scar prickled. He knew at once that it was the sign for *'time's up'*.

"Promise me, Ron," Harry said adamantly. "I have to go, but I won't leave until you give me your word that you'll surrender."

"You're really leaving?" Ron's eyes flickered directly over Harry's, wide and fearful. "D-don't leave me, Harry."

He looked so small and afraid. Harry was sure in that moment that Ron had never believed for a moment that Harry was really there, that he was sure he was talking to a ghost. "Yes, I'm leaving, I have to. It's… it's him, he… I just—just tell me, Ron. Tell me you'll surrender, promise—"

"Let me see you."

Harry stopped short. "Show yourself, show me something, Harry. Otherwise I really am just going to believe that I made this all up. Please."

The prickling in Harry's scar intensified, bordering on painful. He ignored it.

"Okay."

Harry knelt down. Very slowly, he revealed his arm, extending his hand through the iron bars. Ron stared with giant, watery eyes as he examined the words on the back of his hand, which Harry made sure were visible in the dim light of the cell.

Harry James Potter

I must not tell lies.

Ron didn't question the first scar, which Harry had only recently acquired. He just sobbed and reached for Harry's hand, leaning forward as much as he could against the metal collar which pinned him to the wall.

When Harry saw what he was doing, he too reached further. They were just barely able to cling their fingers together when they both tried, though the collar on Ron's neck began to glow faintly.

He didn't seem to notice. Ron clung to Harry's fingers and cried, squeezing his eyes shut as tears flooded down his face. "It really is you," he gasped. "Oh, God, it really is you."

"Y-yeah," Harry replied, trying hard not to cry himself. "It's me."

"Harry. I don't think I can do this. I don't think I—"

"Yes, you can," Harry interrupted. "You can. You *have* to. Going to trial? Please. It's easier than your first Quidditch match."

Ron ignored Harry's attempt at light-heartedness. Instead, in a heartbroken voice, he said, "I'm afraid."

"…Me too," Harry admitted. "But you can do this, Ron. Surrender. Promise me. And I'll do whatever I can to help Hermione, too. But this is what *you* can do for her, and for yourself. Surrender."

Ron finally nodded. "Okay. I-I'll do it, Harry."

Harry's scar began burning in earnest. "I have to go," he said, releasing his hold on Ron's fingers and becoming completely covered by the cloak once more. "You'll be fine, Ron. I believe in you. Goodbye."

Then, knowing that lingering or waiting for a response would only make leaving him more difficult, Harry turned and walked away. He fought back tears as he descended the spiraling staircase, mentally

preparing himself to face the Dark Lord again.

When Harry made it to the bottom of the stairwell, Voldemort was in the exact same position as before. Hands folded, eyes closed. Harry was unsure if he should say something to announce his presence.

He didn't have to. A second later and the burning in his scar stopped. Voldemort opened his eyes and, without hesitating, grabbed Harry by the shoulders, and they disapparated.

They landed back in the bedroom.

Before Harry could adjust to the sudden brightness of the space, Voldemort slid the cloak from his shoulders and stowed it in his front pocket again. Harry opened his mouth in retaliation concerning a number of things—to fight for his cloak back, to bring up the fact that he wanted McGonagall freed, too, for Ron, for Hermione—but Voldemort put a single finger to his lips, effectively silencing him before he could speak.

Voldemort tilted his head to one side, examining Harry's face as his fingers moved from his lips to beneath his jaw. The buoyant light blossomed at his touch, catching Harry off guard.

"St-stop that," he said. Harry backed away, not realizing that the bed was directly behind him and stumbling. Rather than try and remain standing, he sat, acting like he'd meant to do that.

Unfortunately, Voldemort ignored his request and followed him, sitting next to him on the bed and trailing his fingers over Harry's forehead. The pleasant warmth returned, light and welcoming.

Harry felt far more flustered by these actions than he ever had before. It wasn't like this was anything new—Voldemort had been creepily touching him like this for a while now—but the interaction was different now. Being blinded had made everything disconnected. Harry had felt like he was in some conglomeration of a nightmare and a dream, being sightless in that prison cell. But now, with clear vision, eyes wide open, and with Voldemort looking like *that*…

"Did you succeed?"

The Dark Lord's question forced Harry to look up. He did his best to ignore the blissful sensation and the urge to lean into Voldemort's unnaturally alluring touch. "I think so," he said. "You… you weren't

listening to every word we said?"

"No. If you knew I had been listening, would you have been able to say what you needed to say?"

Harry bit his lower lip and contemplated that. It wasn't an easy task, when all he wanted to do was sink into the warmth of that indescribable connection. "Probably not. You could have listened anyway, though."

"I could have," Voldemort agreed. "But I did not. I shall be able to see the truth of it all soon enough, regardless."

Harry scowled, not knowing if that was a lie or not. He supposed it didn't really matter. "Right, because you're the Head of the Wizengamot, now. Congratulations."

Voldemort's magic twitched with something akin to amusement, but he chose not to respond to Harry's sarcasm. Instead, he carded his fingers through Harry's hair, continuing to stare at his face thoughtfully.

"You will remain here while we are at the trial," Voldemort said as he softly trailed his fingers along his scalp.

"We?"

"Yes… The Malfoys, including their son, will all be present. You, however, will be staying right here."

Harry couldn't help it—his eyes widened at the notion of being alone in the manor, and the opportunities which could possibly arise. Voldemort's magic whirled possessively, enveloping Harry in a cloud of glimmering darkness. "Escape from this room is impossible," he said, his tone much icier. "If you so much as *touch* the door handle, I will know. And I can promise you that it would not bode well for your friend if I was forced to leave in the middle of his trial to return here… In fact, I can guarantee that it would end very, *very* badly for him if that were the case."

Voldemort's eyes flashed perilously. Harry shivered, the weight of his aura was so strong. It was that strange, simultaneous sensation, feeling Voldemort's overbearing power alongside that beautiful light. Only… his aura was not as nauseating as before, not so sickening…

Just… *frightening.*

Harry nodded to show that he understood, but that wasn't good enough for Voldemort. He grabbed Harry's hand with the one which was not currently stroking his hair, running his thumb over the scars there.

Harry James Potter

I must not tell lies.

"Say it," he commanded.

Well, Harry thought, if he was about to see the Dark Lord off to go sentence his friend personally, he wanted to make sure he left in as good a mood as possible. "I won't," he promised. When Voldemort's face remained the same and his magic hardly moved, Harry took a deep breath and decided to do the thing properly—even if he did hate himself a bit for saying it.

"I'll never, ever try to escape from you and your overwhelming power again. Never. Everything I am belongs to you... I am yours to command."

Harry wondered for a moment if he'd gone too far, using the same words Voldemort had once said to Dumbledore, back when he'd applied for a teaching position at Hogwarts.

Which Voldemort hadn't really *meant*, of course. Harry could have smacked himself. How was it that he managed to be rebellious, even when he was honestly trying not to be?

Voldemort's brows raised slightly, but his face otherwise remained neutral. If he picked up on Harry's reference, he decided not to comment on it. His magic, though, lightened with that same hint of fondness that Harry had sensed before.

The Dark Lord pulled Harry's hand up so that his wrist was level with his face, his other arm leaving his hair to trail his long, pale fingers along Harry's forearm. Harry watched, confused, as Voldemort stared directly into his eyes while he brought his wrist to his lips, murmuring against his skin the words, *"Good boy."*

…And Harry wasn't sure what it was precisely about the Dark Lord semi-kissing him through words of condescending praise right at his pulse point, but it felt like the most intimate and taboo thing in the world. Harry's mind came to a complete standstill. He could do nothing but sit there while Voldemort kept his lips against his wrist,

where he was sure his pulse was *racing*.

Then he was gone. In a nearly imperceptible flourish, Voldemort released his hold on Harry and stood, silently vanishing into thin air.

Broken and Damaged

Long after he'd departed, Harry had his arm suspended in midair as though Voldemort still held him in his clutches. When he dropped it, he felt extraordinarily warm. Perhaps he had a fever? That wouldn't surprise him, all things considered.

Harry stood. He looked around the room again, trying to find a clock somewhere, when he saw something that surprised him. Behind him, on the other side of the bed, was a small bedside table full of food. Not just a few things, either. It was covered with a massive spread that would easily feed several people. Fruit, toast, eggs, a silver tray filled with various cheeses—and were those *olives?*

Harry gaped as he walked around the bed to examine it properly. There were beverages as well. Behind the silver tray were glasses of water, orange juice, milk, and even a cup of tea, which was steaming as though it had just been poured. Everything was served on the finest china that Harry had ever seen—white porcelain that was rimmed with what was probably real gold.

Harry was baffled. When had this magical breakfast spread appeared? Had it been here the whole time, or had Voldemort somehow made it show up after he'd disappeared?

Either way, the implication was clear.

Eat.

Harry walked away from the tray and started pacing. Though he hadn't eaten properly in a long time, there was no way that he would be able to now. The fact that Voldemort seemed to think this was even possible was ridiculous. How could he be expected to have an appetite when he had been left here, waiting to hear the verdict of his best friend's fate? He hadn't even been able to eat before his *own* trial, years ago… and then, the worst case scenario would have merely been his own expulsion.

Harry scanned the room erratically, eyes widening when he finally found what he was looking for. Behind the vanity and its massive mirror was a grandfather clock. Harry's stomach dropped when he saw the time.

It was only ten in the morning.

Ron's trial wouldn't even *start* until noon! He had hours in which he could do nothing but sit here in this room, waiting.

Well, he thought humorlessly, *at least the Dark Lord has manners and left his hostage with plenty of food and drink.*

Harry glowered. He eyed the tray from across the room, half-tempted to fling it all against the wall and smash the gold-rimmed china into a thousand pieces.

No, stop that, Harry berated himself. *You are not fifteen anymore. You will not resort to breaking things in a fit of rage… Especially when your friend's life hangs in the balance.*

After taking several steadying breaths, Harry looked back at the grandfather clock. He watched the second hand move for what felt like an eternity, though it had actually been less than one full minute.

This, Harry realized, was an altogether new kind of tortuous imprisonment. A gilded cage rather than a cold and dismal cell.

And that was something, wasn't it? Harry made his way back to the bed, perching himself on the edge of it so that he was facing away from the offensive plate of food. His whole transition from tormented hostage to pampered prisoner was quite astonishing.

A few weeks ago, Voldemort had been throwing him against walls in violent whirlwinds of fury. Harry could even understand why, horrible as it had been. The Dark Lord had just found out, in relatively quick succession, that Harry Potter was his own horcrux… only to then realize that Harry Potter was *also* responsible for the destruction of all the rest.

The Dark Lord had been incredibly hate-filled in those first days… but at some point, everything had changed.

It was after he blinded me, Harry concluded. *That was when the Dark Lord stopped being cruel and began being eerily affectionate, instead.*

And Harry thought he understood why.

Harry sighed again, falling onto his back on the luxurious, silk-covered bed. He was momentarily shocked when he was once more met with the sight of his crimson-eyed reflection. Already, he'd forgotten about the mirror on the inside of the canopy. He wondered if Voldemort had put it there on purpose, for no other reason than to

scare him when he woke up to his own likeness—disheveled and covered in dried blood. To make certain that Harry had no doubts in his mind as to whether that violent kiss had been a dream or not.

Harry shuddered. *That kiss…*

His whole body felt uncomfortably warm again. He probably was getting sick, after all…

Harry's mind went sluggish, a wave of exhaustion washing over him. He blinked up at himself, trying to remain focused. He couldn't just pass out, not while Ron was about to go to trial, he couldn't…

Harry awoke to the sensation of being held.

He might have thought it a part of some pleasant dream if he didn't know better. Warm arms encircled him from behind, gently pulling him out of his state of slumber… and it was a case for serious alarm.

Harry jumped, lunging forward to escape Voldemort's disquieting embrace. Surprisingly, Voldemort let him go when he stirred, and Harry almost fell over in his flight. He barely managed to stay on his feet as he turned and took several hasty steps backwards, retreating until he collided with the wall.

The Dark Lord watched him from across the room. He smiled. He was sitting on the corner of the bed, his magic rhythmically swishing back and forth behind him, glimmering softly and reminding Harry of some sort of magical, abstract cat's tail.

"What—how—"

Harry couldn't form a full sentence. His head snapped to one side, and his jaw dropped when he saw the time.

It was nearly one thirty! *How* had he slept so soundly and for so long? Harry looked back at Voldemort, horrified. "What happened, what—"

"Ronald Weasley performed admirably well," Voldemort explained in a low, soothing voice. He stood. "He will not be returning to Azkaban. In fact, he shall be here this evening."

Harry was rendered speechless. Voldemort laughed. "Yes. Ronald Weasley gave us enough pertinent information to allow for his… pardoning. He is on house arrest and he has been stripped of his wand

privileges, though he has the possibility of regaining them, should he behave appropriately and prove himself over the course of the next six months…"

Voldemort's face was emotionless and serene as he spoke, but his magic was so energetic, *merry*. Like there was something which he found deeply amusing, an inside joke that Harry was not privy to.

"I… Really?" was all Harry could manage—partially because he was so shocked, and partially because Voldemort had begun to slowly walk towards him, making that mesmeric light build in the depths of his being again.

"Yes."

Voldemort's magic was fascinating when he moved, it was so spirited. Harry had a hard time not being caught up in the sparkling bits of gold. "He has surrendered and is cooperating with the Ministry, spared a life of imprisonment…"

Harry was frozen to the spot as Voldemort closed the space between them, cupping his face with one hand in an adoring manner. He was flooded with a tidal wave of warmth as Voldemort put his other hand on Harry's neck, leaning closer so that his lips were grazing his forehead, directly over his scar.

"Gorgeous…"

Voldemort whispered the one word so quietly that if Harry hadn't felt the movement of his lips against his skin, he may have thought he imagined it. The enthralling light was so vibrant…

"Stop," Harry gasped, putting his hands on Voldemort's chest. "Stop…"

For a second, Harry thought his feeble demands would have the opposite effect—Voldemort's magic spiked in a sudden, horrific desire—but then it waned, shifting to something far less overwhelming and more bearable. A soft, pulsating warmth that was only mildly distracting.

"You said… here?" Harry asked breathlessly, wishing that the Dark Lord would stop touching his face and neck in such an intimate way. "Ron is… coming here?"

"Yes…" The hand which Voldemort had placed on Harry's neck trailed up to his hair. "He shall be placed under house arrest, but he shall not

be going *home*…"

"Why?"

"Because I require his presence *here*."

Harry stared at that, nervous at the way in which Voldemort's magic vibrated with a pure, undeniable excitement.

"Why?" he asked again, his voice sharper.

What was left of the gentle light vanished. Voldemort's eyes narrowed, both his expression and his aura displaying his irritation. "I have just informed you that your friend is not only being spared *his soul* and the rest of his *life,* but that you will be seeing him in a few hours' time. Rather than be grateful, you instead have the audacity to question me?"

The one hand which he had been carding through Harry's hair dropped to his side, while the other one tightly gripped his chin.

"I—uh—you're right," Harry said defensively, sure that upsetting Voldemort now would not do him any favors. "You're right, I—thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

Voldemort's expression didn't change. Harry wasn't sure what he expected him to do—fall to his knees and worship him from the ground?

…Possibly.

Harry may have been trying to play the role of obedient captive, but he was not about to start bowing and prostrating himself before the Dark Lord like a slave. After a few more seconds of being scrutinized, Voldemort released him.

"What about Hermione?" Harry asked, the concern rushed out of his mouth the second Voldemort stepped away. "You promise you'll spare her, then? Since Ron—"

"The issue of Hermione Granger shall be solved soon enough. I have a plan," Voldemort responded, cutting Harry off and smiling in a way that was anything but reassuring. "Do not look so worried, Harry; you will be intimately involved, as will Ronald Weasley. I shall tell you about it in extreme detail when the time is right. It should be… *fun*."

By the way Voldemort's eyes gleamed and his magic twitched, Harry was sure that whatever plan he had in mind would be the exact opposite of *fun.* "No," he said adamantly. "No, I did what I said I would, I got Ron to surrender, and—and you have to promise me that —"

"I can assure you that the very best thing you can do to ensure the safety of Hermione Granger's life is to never tell me what I can or cannot do ever again," Voldemort said, his aura darkening. "If you want to see her live past this week, then you will hold your tongue on the matter and *obey.*"

Harry would have backed away further, were he not already up against the wall. As it was, he simply nodded, saying nothing, his heart pounding in his chest.

Voldemort waited, watching him closely, until he was seemingly appeased. His aura became less hostile. "I must confess, Harry, that I have another mystery which has been plaguing me… One which only *you* can solve…"

Harry continued to hold his tongue. The Dark Lord reached into his pocket, and Harry felt a thrill of terror sweep up his spine as he expected to see him withdraw the Elder Wand. He gasped in shock at what Voldemort revealed instead.

It was his mokeskin bag!

Harry grinned, nearly as delighted to see it as he had been when Voldemort had shown him his Invisibility Cloak—

But then Harry's brain caught up with his heart. He knew what the Dark Lord was going to tell him to do, even before he spoke.

"Open it."

…Because only Harry could.

"No."

…Because Harry could never be anything other than difficult and idiotically defiant.

Voldemort's perfect mask of control cracked as his eye twitched. His magic whirled in irritation. "Open it, and take out everything which you have stored in it," he commanded in a much icier tone, nodding

towards the vanity where he surely expected Harry to place every single item. Voldemort held the bag out to him expectantly. *"Now."*

Recognizing defeat, Harry begrudgingly took it. He knew there was no way to escape this, and that refusing to do as the Dark Lord demanded would only result in something horrible. As slowly as he dared, Harry opened the bag.

The first thing he pulled out was the Marauder's Map, which appeared as nothing more than a blank piece of parchment. Next was the letter his mother had written to his godfather, crinkled and torn at the edges, and then the accompanying portion of the photograph which had been ripped in half. After that was the sliver of glass which had once been a part of his godfather's mirror. Harry nearly cut himself as he pulled it out. Then the snitch, which was now cracked in half from when he had opened it, whispering the declaration of his own death…

Harry didn't even recall doing that, putting the broken snitch back in his bag. He had been in such a numb state…

But the ring… The ring he had dropped, he had left that in the forest…

The very last thing which Harry pulled out was his wand. Snapped in half, held together only by the strands of a brilliant phoenix feather.

Harry's heart felt hollow as he laid each one of these seemingly useless, damaged things out on the wooden surface of the vanity. Voldemort watched him with an unreadable expression, but his magic showed his true, albeit mild, feelings. With each item it whirled a bit, slightly curious or confused. It was not until Harry revealed his broken, holly wand that it reacted greatly, and Harry was surprised to sense that Voldemort felt…

Empathetic?

Harry said nothing as he stood there, staring down at what was left of his most prized possessions, other than his cloak. He set the mokeskin bag down next to them, open and empty.

Voldemort began to examine each one of the belongings more closely. Harry watched him, his heart thundering as the Dark Lord quickly read the letter *his mother* had written, looked at the photograph of *himself* as a baby riding on a toy broomstick with *his father* laughing in the background, glanced quickly at the broken mirror shard which had belonged to *his godfather*…

"Why did you feel the need to keep these?" Voldemort finally asked as he held the shattered snitch in one hand. "Such broken and damaged things?"

Harry fought back the urge to grab the snitch from his fingers, to put everything back in the bag protectively and hoard it away. "Maybe I have an affection for broken and damaged things," he muttered.

Voldemort's muscles visibly tensed. His magic froze too, and Harry wasn't sure what to make of that strange reaction, why—

Oh.

Harry's face burned. He really was good at saying poignant, idiotic things without meaning to, wasn't he?

"I didn't—I meant—they weren't always broken," Harry spluttered, trying to distract from his own, awkward statement. "They're just… broken now."

Voldemort stared. Harry went on, realizing that he might be making things worse. "I mean. The letter has another part somewhere, and the photo I found like that, because Snape—"

Voldemort's magic suddenly surged, black and venomous. Harry stopped talking at once.

Yet the Dark Lord's face remained immaculately composed. He raised one brow in surprise—confused, probably, as to why Harry had abruptly broken off like that.

Doing his best to ignore the cloud of hellacious black magic stirring the air, Harry continued. "He, ah. Ripped it, before I found it," he said. "And this shard used to be a part of a larger mirror…"

Harry's hesitated, unable to elaborate on any of these items much, least of all to Lord Voldemort. "And the snitch, I-I only broke recently, but it's nostalgic, I guess, it was the first one I caught… and well. My wand."

He didn't bother explaining that one. Voldemort set the snitch back on the vanity and nodded, his threatening magic diminishing to its usual haze of blackness and glinting specks of gold.

"…And this?" The Dark Lord held up the Marauder's Map, which was currently blank. Harry didn't look at him when he responded, just

shrugged and kept his head down.

"One can always use space parchment," he mumbled.

Voldemort didn't buy that for a second—not that Harry expected him to. It was unnerving to sense the way in which his aura danced with curiosity, the see out of the corner of his eye the way in which Voldemort's long fingers grazed the surface of the parchment like he was searching for the secrets there.

"…I see."

Then Voldemort did something which stunned Harry so badly he was sure he was imagining it even as he watched it happen.

The Dark Lord took another long look at each of the remaining items on the vanity—the letter, the photo, the mirror fragment, the snitch, his broken wand—and then, in one fluid and seamless motion, retracted the Elder Wand from his inner pocket and with a single, wordless spell, vanished them all, even the empty mokeskin bag.

Harry stared at the now vacant space in a state of total shock. "… Did… Did you just vanish them…?" he gasped.

"Your observance is remarkable," Voldemort responded coolly.

Harry *snapped*. "*Why would you do that?*" he roared, rage exploding in his chest. Harry's hands clenched into fists, and he did, in fact, have a huge desire to punch Voldemort in the face. "*Why* would you do that, *why* would you—"

"Because it was *trash*," Voldemort seethed in disgust. Rather than be intimidated by Harry's anger even slightly, Voldemort drew himself to his full height, his dark magic rising behind him and making him seem impossibly tall and threatening. "Moments ago, you had not thought you would ever see your broken possessions again. Yet now that I have vanished the remains of your past life, you are upset? Are you *angry*, Harry, that I disposed of some objects that held great meaning to you?"

Harry's fury dwindled and died, replaced by a mounting fear as Voldemort's magic became deadlier by the second. Harry didn't respond, only held his breath to see what Voldemort would do.

After a tense moment, the Dark Lord's magic stopped swelling in spite and his face became blank once more. Harry could breathe again.

"They were just things," he said, somewhat contemptuously.

Harry eyed the Marauder's Map, which the Dark Lord still held in one hand. "Why not that one?" he blurted out, pointing to it. "You vanished all the rest of my things. Why not that?"

"One can always use spare parchment," Voldemort said, smirking as he placed it in one of his pockets.

Harry's face burned and his jaw dropped, wanting to say so many things and being unable to voice a single one.

Voldemort's smirk widened before he turned and glanced over his shoulder. "You did not eat," he said. His expression, absurdly enough, bordered on disappointed.

Harry was beyond baffled by this change of demeanor and topic. "I don't have much of an appetite these days," he said.

Voldemort's magic shifted in way that was almost like he was feeling… Well, not *guilty*—far from it—but some sort of unpleasant recognition that he *might* have had something to do with Harry's abysmal physical state.

"You need to eat," Voldemort said emotionlessly. "You are extremely malnourished and thin."

"That's my general state," Harry responded, his tone equally detached.

"You realize that I can retract any and all of my previous, *merciful* actions at any point, don't you, Harry?"

Harry was still for a long moment. Voldemort's magic swelled in anticipation, like he was just waiting for Harry to defy him.

Moving slowly, Harry walked towards the tray of food. Everything that had been cooked was cold, now, and the tea was no longer steaming. He picked up an apple and, looking right at Voldemort, took one, single bite before setting it back down again.

"Wow," he said as soon as he'd swallowed. "Full already. Thank you, I am eternally grateful."

Voldemort smiled sweetly. It was an expression that was in great contrast to his magic, which had once more blackened significantly. "I am beginning to think that you lied to me, Harry," he said. "I am

beginning to think that you *do* like pain."

Harry's scar exploded in white-hot agony. He howled, accidentally knocking over the table filled with food when he jerked. The fine china went crashing to the floor, a cacophony of breaking porcelain to accompany his screams.

It didn't last long. The pain stopped after only a few moments, though Harry's scar continued to throb afterwards. He leaned against the wall, panting.

"Is that why you continue to be so disrespectful, Harry? Do you *enjoy* the experience of my wrath?"

"Oh, yeah," Harry spat. "It's my favorite thing, that."

The same pain immediately struck him even harder than before. Harry bit his lip to stifle his outcry this time, determined to not scream again. He closed his eyes and tried with all of his might not to yell, not to—

Beg, was the unspoken message which Voldemort's magic commanded from across the room. The same exact message it had been saying for weeks when he'd had Harry locked in a cell, blind and alone.

Beg for the pain to stop.

Beg for mercy.

Beg. Beg. Beg.

Harry had refused then, and he refused now.

The horrific pain only got worse. Harry had to put both hands against the wall to remain standing under the onslaught of it, biting his lip so hard now to stop from shouting that he drew blood. He shook his head, trying desperately to fight it, to find some other way to stave off the pain.

There was none. Voldemort slowly approached, standing next to him and looking down at him with that same, twisted grin on his lips. His magic became far more eager, like he was so certain that Harry was about to finally break and plead with him to stop.

Beg. Beg. Beg.

Harry wouldn't.

"Beg," Voldemort finally said out loud.

The pain lessened, possibly so that Harry could speak. He looked at Voldemort with watery eyes, glaring. “Never,” he said. “You can't make me do that."

"Can't I…?" Voldemort tilted his head to one side, scarlet eyes accessing him thoughtfully. "Did you not say you were *mine to command*, Harry?"

"Not that. I'll never grovel at your feet and beg for anything. Nothing you can ever do will make me do that."

"I can make you do anything I want."

Before Harry could respond, the pain vanished. That pleasant warmth rushed through his veins, surging through him and making him lightheaded. It was so intense that Harry could feel it like an actual entity; a living, breathing thing like a serpent which was coiled around his very soul, moving, writhing, and Harry could not tell where he began and this twisting, coiling serpent ended…

It was all so familiar and yet… not. It was the same kind of serpentine entity that he recalled from the Ministry so long ago, only this was all blissful warmth, not burning misery…

Harry felt his knees buckling and his jaw moving of their own accord, yet it was not with an agonizing wrench, but a sweet, gentle persuasion with which his body moved… When his lips parted to speak, it was not painful in the slightest…

"I…"

Harry's euphoric mind was filled with an instant, sobering horror as he realized what was happening.

Voldemort was possessing him… *and it wasn't hurting.*

No, he thought in a state of absolute panic. *No, no—*

The second he internally refused, the light and pleasantness turned into a fierce and terrible storm of pain.

Now it was *exactly* like it had been at the Ministry. Pain so terrible that Harry wanted to die from it. Harry screamed and crumpled to the floor, seeing nothing but a flash of violent red—

Then everything stopped. Harry's heart raced as he tried to regain his breath, disoriented from such extreme sensations.

When he opened his eyes, Harry was shocked to find that he was eye-level with Voldemort. The Dark Lord had also fallen to the ground, and looked to be in a similar state. He must have shared in that same, earth-shattering pain.

Voldemort glared when Harry caught his eye. Despite what a horrible experience it had been, Harry couldn't help but feel smug. Voldemort had tried to make him beg—had tried once more to possess him, even —and he had *failed.*

"…Ha," Harry said between labored breaths, grinning.

Voldemort recovered from the pain much quicker than Harry did.

In an imperceptible motion, Voldemort had him around the throat, pinning him against the wall with a single hand by the neck, his strength obscenely inhuman. "I should put you back in that cell and leave you there for all eternity," he snarled, eyes blazing.

"That's no way to treat your last horcrux," Harry said in a raspy voice, even as he struggled to breathe.

True, honest fear cut across Voldemort's features, and his magic became flavored with anxiety. The sight made Harry feel high with superiority, and far, far too reckless.

"You shouldn't force their magic to exist outside of their bodies, either, just so you can harvest whatever you need… So you could heal your broken and damaged body."

Harry knew that his somewhat shaky hypothesis was correct by the way Voldemort's magic brightened, a mixture of even more surprise and—there it was—*embarrassment.* Voldemort let go of his neck, eyes widening in disbelief. "Yeah, I knew it was *you!*" Harry shouted, uncaring of the fact that this was sure to end badly for him. "I knew it was you impersonating Narcissa, because you screwed up! She never called me by my name, for whatever reason… Maybe she was afraid of me."

He paused for only a second to laugh before carrying on, relishing Voldemort's thunderstruck expression. "What I *don't* understand… is why. Why would you bother impersonating her to do whatever it was you did? Why not just do it yourself?"

Voldemort's expression became cold and blank. He looked at Harry with no visible emotion, though his magic was glimmering in an odd fashion. Harry could not decipher at all.

"…Light magic," Voldemort said at length, "cannot be forced. It was dark magic which damaged me. Only light magic could heal it… That must be given willingly, and it needed to come from a soul which was whole."

He said it all in a quiet, reverent tone. Harry was astonished that he was getting any explanation at all. "A whole soul that was willing? Couldn't… couldn't you have used just about anybody, then?"

Voldemort didn't answer, but Harry could see the truth of it in the way his aura shimmered and lightened just barely. "Why me?" he shouted, incensed. "Haven't you tormented me enough? Kidnapping me, blinding me, torturing me—"

"Because I only use the best."

"Making me—what?"

Harry froze at the implication in those words. Voldemort's face was still undecipherable.

"…The best," he repeated in a whisper.

Harry's mouth went dry, his stomach coiling in an uncomfortable way which he adamantly ignored. He found that he was unable to look anywhere but at the floor, suddenly. "…And you just… thought I would say no?" Voldemort's answering nod was very slight, but Harry caught it from the corner of his eye. "Well, you were wrong," he said, his gaze still downcast.

The air rang in the silence. Harry had never felt more awkward or uncomfortable in his life, standing in a bedroom with Lord Voldemort, who had just told him that his magic—his soul?—was the very best…

It was an unbearable situation which was made even worse by the way Voldemort's aura was… doing something, something that was both mesmerizing and deeply confusing.

Harry didn't see Voldemort move when he finally did. The Dark Lord was suddenly in front of him, making Harry's heart skip several beats when his hands ghosted over his hips.

"I have work to do," he said. "You will be tended to while I am gone. I expect you to be fully rested and capable when I return in a few hours' time with your wayward *friend…"*

"Are you—"

Harry's inquiries were immediately and literally disrupted when Voldemort caught his lower lip between his teeth. He bit Harry in the exact same place where he had bitten himself earlier, when he'd been determined not to scream.

Voldemort ran his tongue along his trapped, swollen lip, and a heat that was unrelated to anything pertaining to souls pooled in Harry's stomach.

The kiss which followed was the antithesis of the bloody, violent affair which had occurred the night before. Voldemort was exceedingly cautious and gentle, his tongue easily slipping between Harry's lips when he was met with no resistance.

Harry had no coherent thought whatsoever. His body reacted instinctually—which was, in all actuality, illogical and conflicting. His hands flew up to Voldemort's chest, weak but undeniable attempts to push him away. The rest of his body, however, seemed to yearn for the exact thing he was trying to disentangle himself from. Harry's spine arched and his head tilted back, his mouth opening wider like he was starving for the Dark Lord's kiss.

It was dizzying but brief. When Voldemort pulled away, his magic was glittering more vibrantly than ever before, like stars in a night sky. His eyes were darkened, fixed on Harry's with such an intensity he thought he might faint.

Before he vanished, Voldemort smiled, murmuring words that felt more like a confession than a farewell.

"You *fascinate* me, Harry Potter."

Blood Magic

What the fuck?

Harry raised his hand, grazing his fingers over his swollen lip where the Dark Lord had just bitten him—*gently*—and then…

His face felt like it had been lit on fire the blush that followed was so strong. "What the *fuck*," he breathed out loud, shaking his head. For a time, that seemed to be the only coherent thought that Harry James Potter was capable of.

What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck?

Harry started pacing. He forced his mind, which seemed intent to race in circles with swears, to form some useful thoughts.

Voldemort had told him that his magic was the best.

Voldemort had then kissed him.

And he, Harry… hadn't exactly hated it.

Harry covered his burning face with his hands. This…was very bad.

You're just really messed up right now, Harry, he told himself, continuing to pace and crossing his arms. *Stress is very high, you've been held prisoner for weeks, and wasn't that a thing, growing…* affectionate *towards your captor?*

But Harry did not harbor anything even resembling affection towards Lord Voldemort… Did he?

No, I don't, Harry thought stubbornly. *Not at all. Voldemort is still a murderous, dangerous monster, no matter what he looks like… And I am not attracted to him anyway. Regardless of his current features. Not at all.*

Harry's fingers traced over his lower lip again, his heart racing and face burning even hotter.

…I am also a liar, he then admitted.

Harry groaned, lamenting the undeniable truth of it. How many times had he referred to the Tom Riddle he'd seen in memories with Dumbledore (in the privacy in his own mind, of course) as *handsome?*

He hadn't thought anything of it at the time though, because they were just *memories* of a *boy*. It had been so easy, then, to differentiate between the attractive teenager from the past and the monstrosity of the present.

But now…

Harry felt the blood drain from his flushed face. This was all just a horrible and complex manipulation, he realized—one that had been going on for a long time. The Dark Lord had been underhandedly trying to influence him for a long time now, doing things to endear himself to Harry slowly and stealthily.

The memories, for starters. Voldemort had been feeding him innocent memories of Tom Riddle, young and harmless looking, either acting brilliant and charismatic or being treated poorly by Dumbledore. Memories which were Harry's only moments of being able to see, so that Harry was constantly craving the Dark Lord's presence.

Only Voldemort didn't know that Harry was aware of all the *other* times that he had visited him, too. Those long stretches of silence where the Dark Lord would merely watch him as a quiet observer in the corner, his black magic writhing covetously and making Harry feel ill.

And thank Merlin he did know! Harry could only imagine how much worse his state of mind might be if he hadn't experienced those disquieting moments to ground him—to viscerally remind him just how deranged the Dark Lord really was.

…There was also the light.

That blissful buoyancy that felt *far* too good.

Yet that particular form of manipulation, Harry thought, might actually be backfiring on Lord Voldemort. It was a truth that had been dawning on Harry for some time, and now, after sensing that brief but powerful emotion of relief that had emanated in Voldemort's magic before they'd left for Azkaban, Harry knew it with certainty:

Voldemort was becoming increasingly addicted… to Harry's *soul.*

Even more bizarre was that Harry was not at all surprised by this. He had felt it himself, during those moments when he'd broken into Voldemort's psyche. What was left of Voldemort's soul was so fractured, so cold. It must have been heavenly for him, to feel what it

was like to be whole again… Even if it *was* through the act of feeling the soul of *Harry Potter*.

Harry shuddered. Was Voldemort still that way, after using Harry's magic to heal his body? Harry contemplated that. More than likely, yes. Magic could only do so much—the only way to repair a fractured soul was through remorse, and Harry was pretty sure the Dark Lord hadn't been doing any sorrowful penitence recently.

A blackened soul within a beautiful body. Lord Voldemort was a more complex entity than ever before.

But Harry couldn't help but wonder… Why return to looking like his old self? Why bother to regain the appearance of Tom Riddle? Wouldn't it have just been simpler to create a new appearance, to—

A horrible fear gripped Harry so abruptly that he nearly swayed.

Did Voldemort *know?* Did the Dark Lord *know* that Harry had thought of Tom Riddle as handsome? Harry imagined a terrible possibility, recalling all of the times that he had been asleep under the influence of a Dreamless Draught, wondering if Voldemort might have appeared during those times, and—and could one perform Legilimency on an unconscious person? Was it a *real* possibility that the Dark Lord had combed through his memories without him being any the wiser, seeing *exactly* how Harry had known about Tom Riddle Senior and Merope Gaunt and thinking just how *handsome* their son was?

Harry forced those thoughts away. *You're being irrational and paranoid, Harry. You would know, if he had done that. You would know.*

He sighed heavily. Harry realized then that he had to come to terms with a few things about himself.

He wasn't gay… was he? No, he had certainly been attracted to Cho, and he had been irrefutably, irrevocably—

No. Don't.

…He fancied girls.

Harry frowned, biting his lower lip and then instantly thinking of Voldemort doing the same thing, heat pooling in his stomach and his back arching instinctively.

…He was attracted to blokes too, then.

Harry stopped pacing, turning to face himself head on in the vanity mirror. He stared into his own eyes, blood-red irises which were the exact same hue as the Dark Lord's. It was disquieting, just how different he looked without his characteristic green eyes and glasses.

Trying not to linger on that, Harry took a deep breath and gave himself a pointed look.

"I am bisexual," he said flatly.

It was enough of a statement to shock his reflection out of mimicking him. The Harry Potter in the mirror raised both of its eyebrows, looking dubious. "Congratulations," it finally responded. Then, "Fix your collar, dear, you look a mess."

Scowling, Harry turned away, ignoring it.

Okay, he thought, *okay. That's all fine. Attracted to both sexes—that's fine.*

Attracted to Tom Riddle… a bit more problematic.

But he could deal with this. He was a rational person. Being attracted to someone *physically* didn't mean being attracted to them in any other way. It was absolutely possible to remain unaffected by someone's looks. This was Lord Voldemort—*nothing* that he could do would ever make it possible for Harry to be so idiotically manipulated, especially not by something as shallow as his *appearance.*

And yet you keep touching your lower lip, imagining Voldemort kissing *you,* a small but extremely judgmental voice whispered in the back of his mind.

A momentary lapse of bad judgement! Harry roared back at himself defiantly. A few seconds of being caught off guard!

You enjoyed it.

I did not!

You want it to happen again.

"No!"

Harry jumped when his outburst was met with a high-pitched squeal of surprise. He whipped around to see Narcissa Malfoy in the doorway, clutching her chest and looking frightened.

"I'm sorry!" she shouted, thinking that Harry was yelling at her. Her magic was frazzled and vibrant. "I should have knocked, I—"

"No, no, *I'm* sorry, I—er, I was just—" Harry stopped short, not even bothering to try and explain. He walked over to her, feeling awful for having scared her so.

Narcissa recovered quickly, though, and she pulled him into a quick hug. She held him at arm's length afterwards and fixed Harry with a serious expression. "Your friend will be here soon," she said. "He's still at the Ministry, but they will be bringing him shortly. The Dark Lord sent me back to tend to you." She paused, examining his robes and quickly fixing his collar which he had ignored. "Do you think you can eat something?"

"Er… I really don't think so, no."

She nodded understandably. "All right, well… Come with me. We can wait in the foyer; they'll be coming by Floo..."

"Okay." Harry said. "Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy."

"Oh, no. You *must* call me Narcissa," she responded, smiling.

"Well, then, you *must* call me Harry."

Narcissa smiled wider. "All right, then… Harry. Follow me."

Waiting in the foyer of Malfoy manor with Narcissa had been a strange enough experience the first time around. Now it felt even more surreal, as they sat in two of the most luxurious arm chairs that Harry had ever seen near a giant, currently empty fireplace.

They were silent for a few minutes, their eyes both fixed on the vacant space where they expected emerald flames to erupt at any moment. Where soon, the Dark Lord, Lucius Malfoy, Draco, and *Ron* would be arriving…

Harry physically jumped as he realized something—something he *should* have thought about before. "My eyes," he gasped, looking at a startled Narcissa like she might be able to provide the solution. "What in the world am I supposed to tell Ron about my eyes?"

Narcissa's lips parting uselessly, speechless. Harry wasn't sure what he expected. Narcissa herself probably didn't understand why they were

red, she just didn't question the things that her master did.

Eventually, she offered him a wordless shrug, but no advice. "Shit," Harry said. She didn't chide him for swearing.

The fireplace sparked to life with bright, green fire.

Harry closed his eyes, delaying the inevitable. He and Narcissa both stood, and Harry relied on his other senses for the moment. Right away he could feel the odd, light magic of Draco, which had an almost air-like quality to it. Next to his was a similar aura, only denser, grayer… It must have belonged to Lucius. And then—

How had he not noticed it, before? Why had he not felt Ron's magic when he was in Azkaban? Had he just been that distracted? Or perhaps that thick, metal collar had been suppressing it, smothering Ron's magic and weakening him.

Harry wasn't sure, but he could certainly sense it now. He almost smiled when he did. Ron's magical energy was exactly as Harry might have thought it would be—warm and friendly, a sort of orange hue that reminded him very much of the Weasley's hair.

"*Harry!"*

That warm magic brightened significantly. Harry kept his eyes closed, and Ron didn't question it, yet—he simply rushed forward and grabbed him, pulling him into a rib-breaking hug.

Harry hugged him back, opening his eyes only to look over Ron's shoulder to where Narcissa, Lucius, and Draco stood. Draco watched the way Ron clung to Harry with distaste, as did his father.

Voldemort's absence was duly noted. "Where is the Dark Lord?" Narcissa asked her husband.

Lucius turned away from Ron's evidently inappropriate display of affection to look at his wife. "He and your lovely sister are still at the Ministry, finishing a few things… They should be here shortly."

Harry's stomach dropped at that. *Bellatrix Lestrange* would be coming, too…

Narcissa nodded. "We'll just… give you two a moment," she said, glancing at Harry and Ron. "Shall we? Lucius, Draco…"

Draco didn't need to be told twice. He turned and left, obviously wanting to get as far away from Harry and Ron as possible. Lucius, however, looked uncertain. His wife glared at him, and Harry almost laughed at the way his magic withered under her stare, instantly resigned to listen to her without a word.

Before they followed their son, Narcissa shot Harry a look which he recognized well. It was the same expression he had seen on Mrs. Weasley countless times when addressing the twins, a look that said:

Don't do anything stupid.

Then she and her husband stepped away, giving Harry and Ron the illusion of privacy.

Ron finally released him. Harry shut his eyes again. "Harry," he said, still gripping his shoulders. "Harry—why won't you look at me? Where are your glasses? What—"

"Ron, I—I need you to not freak out," Harry interrupted, eyelids still tightly closed. Ron's magic was pulsating anxiously. "I'll explain everything, but I need you to not scream or something. All right?"

"Okay?"

Harry slowly opened his eyes, looking at Ron with a weak smile that might have made the moment worse.

Ron released Harry's shoulders at once and took several hasty steps back. Before Harry could say anything, he spat out the single word, "*Why?*"

"I'm going to explain!" Harry said, putting his arms up defensively. He ran a hand through his hair, and even though he tried to come up with some other reason, he knew he couldn't. He exhaled slowly, realizing that he was going to have to do something insane: tell the truth.

"Er… Well, so, I was brought here right after the battle at Hogwarts, like I said," he began, and Ron stood perfectly still, listening. "And… I tried to escape once by summoning Kreacher, and um. That didn't exactly work. He kind of… cut Kreacher's head off, and then dragged me along to a Death Eater meeting and forced me to sign over Grimmauld Place to Bellatrix—which is why I have another fucking scar on my hand, by the way. So that made me pretty mad, and I kind of… called Voldemort a fucking monster in front of all of his Death

Eaters."

Ron jumped violently and his magic twitched—whether at Voldemort's name being spoken or the information Harry was relaying to him, Harry wasn't sure. He didn't say anything, though, so Harry kept going. "As you might imagine, he didn't like that, and so he took me back to the cell, and, er. Well, he made a threat about amortentia, and long story short, I essentially told him he was just like his mum and strongly insinuated that he was ugly."

Harry paused to laugh weakly. Ron's face and magic were both so frozen with shock it was like he'd been petrified. Harry cleared his throat and carried on. "So, you know, he blinded me. I was blind for… I don't know, a week, maybe? And when he gave me my sight back, he looked like he does now, and my eyes were like… this."

Silence. Ron stared at Harry with that same, unmoving expression.

"…Oh," he eventually said, his voice far too high. "Okay."

"Just… Just okay?"

Ron shrugged, far too casually. "Sure," he said, his tone still too high-pitched. "That all seems relatively in character for everyone. Yeah, Sure."

"You are taking this… well," Harry said cautiously. "Too well," he added, because it was true.

"Right, well, I think I've just figured it all out." Ron looked around the foyer, his eyes lingering on the chandelier that had once been their saving grace. "Hermione managed to kill me in the forest after all. I'm dead. This is it." He threw his arms out on either side of himself, grinning.

"This is hell."

"Ron, you're not dead," Harry said, trying not to laugh at what was anything but a humorous situation. "You're not in hell."

"Are you sure?" Ron asked, lowering his arms. "Are you *quite* sure? Because I can literally not think of worse circumstances. Do you know what my sentence was, Harry? Do you know what my life is going to be for the next six months, if this is, in fact, reality?"

Harry shook his head. Ron's grin was becoming wider and more

troubling by the second. "Six months of service to the Ministry of Magic, working directly under the Head of the Muggle-Born Registration Committee to re-educate me on my *misguided* ideals. Do you remember who that is, Harry? *Do you?"*

Harry's hand flew to his mouth, too horrified to say it out loud.

"*Umbridge!"* Ron answered for him, his arms flying out again. "Six months of being forced to help Umbridge run that foul operation! *Umbridge,* Harry!" He giggled in the same way he had when he'd been attacked by giant brains in the Department of Mysteries. Harry cringed at the sound. "But the silver lining is that I don't start until next Monday. Maybe between now and then, something truly awful will happen, and I won't have to go at all."

He stared up at the chandelier longingly, like he was hoping it might fall on *him.* "Why couldn't he have just killed me?" he murmured morbidly.

"No—Ron, no, get a grip on yourself!" Harry shouted. "It—it could be worse, it…"

Harry tried and failed to come up with something worse, short of life in Azkaban. Ron laughed again. "Oh, but it *is* worse, Harry!" he exclaimed. "The trial… Do you know what I've done? What he made me tell him?"

Harry's heart skipped a beat. "Hermione?" he asked, dreading the answer.

Ron shook his head. "No… In fact, he only asked me a few questions about her. Only where we went when we first went on the run, the three of us, and if I knew where she was now. I couldn't lie, Harry, they made me take veritaserum, but I wasn't able to tell him where she was, because I don't know. That was all he asked about Hermione…"

His eyes went out of focus for a moment. Harry didn't say anything, and a second later Ron blinked rapidly and kept talking. "No, it was… It's Fred and George, Harry. I… He asked me if I knew who the hosts of *Potterwatch* were, and I couldn't lie, I couldn't, I…"

Ron's voice broke. Harry put his hands on his arm, a futile attempt to make him feel better. "It's not your fault," he said. "It's n-not your fault, Ron, you couldn't help it... Do they know, though? Do they know that the Dark Lord knows who they are, now?"

"I imagine they probably do. They knew that *I* knew it was them, and it was all over the news when I was taken into custody… Fred and George are smart, I'm sure they went on the run the moment they heard I was in Azkaban, knowing that I would be forced to tell you-know-who everything I know." Ron swiped at his eyes, obviously trying very hard not to cry. "He did it on purpose, Harry. Having my trial today when he did. They're supposed to host another show this afternoon—soon, really soon. Like, in an hour soon. At *four*," he said as he frantically checked his watch.

Harry gaped. "You don't think they're *still going to broadcast*, do you?"

Yet even as he asked the question, Harry knew the answer. "Are you kidding? Of course they will, now more than ever. They'll want to tell everyone what happened from their point of view. But they always move around when they broadcast. They had to start doing that when the Snatchers started looking for them… Just because you-know-who knows who they are now, that doesn't mean he'll be able to find them. Right? I mean, he couldn't find us… Right?"

He looked at Harry pleadingly. Harry nodded, though he had a dark sense of foreboding. "Right," he said, forcing a smile. "Right, I'm sure they'll be fine…"

Ron swallowed thickly. Harry pulled him into another hug, noting then that Ron's body was shaking in a way that he hadn't been able to see by looking at him.

"Aw… Isn't it just so *sweet!*"

Bellatrix's voice made Harry's skin crawl. Ron jumped away, his magic whirling in a panic.

Lord Voldemort had arrived silently with his deadliest lieutenant at his side, apparating directly into Malfoy manor without notice. His magic was glittering perilously, and there was a hungry gleam in his eyes as he looked back and forth between Harry and Ron.

Harry's focus, however, was on the witch who was currently cackling like a mad woman. Harry had never seen Bellatrix's magic before. It was a deep red, like wine, and it moved with a liquid elegance that was strangely dark and mesmerizing. *Powerful,* Harry could sense that at once. Bellatrix's magic was full of graceful deadliness.

Harry felt a bit overwhelmed for a moment, sensing the magical auras of three people at once which were all so full of emotion. They

couldn't have been more different from one another—Ron's a bright orange which was so friendly feeling, Bellatrix's a rich burgundy which made Harry think of velvet, and the Dark Lord's veil of blackness which shimmered with flecks of gold…

Harry almost missed Bellatrix's arm. Her right hand, which Hermione had severed with a dark curse, had been replaced. Unlike Pettigrew's gift of a new limb, however, Bellatrix's was black, like polished gunmetal.

"Ickle Harry Potter and Ron Weasley, together again at last!" she drawled in that atrocious baby voice. "How *adorable!*"

"Yes…" Voldemort's tone was the exact opposite of Bellatrix's. He spoke in a soft, low murmur, tilting his head to one side as he assessed the two of them. The gleam in his eyes made Harry's stomach twist into knots. "And yet, they look so… incomplete. Don't you agree, Bellatrix? Only two of the three of Dumbledore's little trio. They look so wrong without their missing puzzle piece. It fills my heart with such… *sadness.*"

"So sad," Bellatrix agreed emphatically, sticking out her lower lip. "Brings me to tears, it does."

"Yes, I think we must do what we can to remedy this terrible tragedy," Voldemort went on. "After all, I like to have the full picture, the complete set… I confess, I have an insatiable interest in collecting rare things… Ah, but you already knew that about me, didn't you? Harry… *Ron?*"

Ron's face turned a worrisome shade of green when Voldemort called him by his first name. Harry wondered if he, personally, looked any better.

"Bellatrix," Voldemort said. "You are dismissed for the time being. I will summon you when we are ready to leave. Be prepared."

"Of course, my Lord."

Bellatrix bowed deeply before exiting through the same door which the Malfoys had earlier. Voldemort, whose attention had never left his captives, smiled, his magic glinting playfully.

Harry had never been more worried.

Without warning, the Dark Lord grabbed them both, ensnaring Harry's

right wrist and Ron's left in each of his hands. A fluttering sensation of that familiar light danced across Harry's skin, slight but irrevocably present. Voldemort looked right at him, smiling deviously.

"This is the part… where things get *fun*."

They all disapparated.

The three appeared in an unfamiliar chamber.

It reminded Harry somewhat of the Potions classroom at Hogwarts, though that was likely only because there were many shelves full of glass vials, elixirs, and draughts. Harry saw Polyjuice Potion among them, and was that *Felix Felicis*?

He didn't get to stare for long. Voldemort released his hold on them once they landed, instantly moving across the room and flicking his wrist at one of the cabinets. The doors flew open, and from within came a fragile, silver instrument which Harry recognized. Dumbledore had used one in front of him in his fifth year, after Mr. Weasley had been attacked…

Harry wondered if this was that same instrument, or if Voldemort had acquired one of his own. The Dark Lord levitated it—completely without the use of his wand—until it rested on a table before him. He looked at it intently for a moment before he finally reached into his robes and withdrew the Deathstick.

Harry and Ron exchanged a terrified look. Ron's face was still an abysmal shade of green.

Then, without explaining what he was doing, Voldemort tapped the surface of the silver instrument where there was a small, shallow basin. Smoke began emanating from within, a silvery gas that looked very different from the puffs of green smoke which Dumbledore had conjured.

The gray mist hovered a few inches over the silver basin. Voldemort watched it with little expression on his face, but his magic whirled, curious and enigmatic.

In another rapid motion, Voldemort had Ron's wrist in his hand again. He held it over the basin and, before he or Harry could so much as draw a breath, slashed the Elder Wand across Ron's palm, cutting into his skin and drawing blood. Ron yelped in pain, and though his body

jerked away instinctually, Voldemort held him in place.

The blood trailed down Ron's hand and dripped into the mist. The second it did, the gray fog became tinged with red. Voldemort grinned sardonically, casting Ron's arm aside and sending him staggering back towards Harry.

Harry grabbed Ron by the shoulders to steady him. Neither of them said anything as they both watched, engrossed in whatever it was Voldemort was doing. The red mist began whirling, moving like a living entity that had yet to take form.

"Show me," Voldemort murmured to it. "Trace, hunt, *find*."

The red fog twitched and a soft, hissing sound emitted from within it. "Oh God," Ron whimpered quietly under his breath. "Oh, God, oh God…."

The mist expanded and grew until it was a cloud of ruby plumes. Its shape was becoming clearer—a serpent, a red snake of smoke. "More," Voldemort urged, and the serpentine entity became more solid, a scaly face emerging. It opened its ephemeral mouth, hissing the same word back to Voldemort.

"*More…"*

Without hesitating, Voldemort had Ron's still-bleeding hand once more over the basin. The ghostly, red serpent unhinged its jaws and tilted its head back, its forked tongue flickering out greedily. Voldemort looked gleeful as Ron whimpered, more of his blood dripping into the serpent's mouth.

The snake's jaw snapped shut. Ron was cast aside again, and they all stared as the snake deteriorated into something… something *human*…

There were two of them…

"No," Ron gasped in horror.

Fred and George.

Their likenesses were appearing in the bloody mist, sitting at a table where they hastily rearranged papers. It was like watching a movie made of crimson haze. Voldemort's eyes were shining when they appeared, hissing the word, "*Yessss*…"

Voldemort then held both hands over the silver instrument, and when he moved them out on either side of him, the scene before them became smaller, like a camera lens which was zooming out, showing a larger picture…

He is going to find out where they are, Harry realized in horror as they looked down upon what was now an urban, outdoor environment. *He is going to find Fred and George.*

Voldemort examined the city street for a few seconds. Harry could sense the precise moment when he realized where it was—both by his magic which swirled and the way his grin widened, exposing his teeth predatorily.

He brandished the Deathstick over the bloody fog, and it vanished; the silver instrument looked so small and innocent in its absence. He then turned his attention to Harry and Ron.

"Don't look so troubled. *Ron*, you should be happy! You are going to see your charming brothers again."

"No," Ron said, his face no longer tinged with green but a stark white. "No, you can't kill them, you—"

"Kill? You insult me. I do not kill so lightly, though *Rapier* and *Rodent* have certainly earned themselves horrible punishments for their transgressions. However… I will not kill them, so long as you two cooperate."

He flashed them both another smile that would have looked right at home on a demon. He grabbed Ron by the elbow—much more gently, this time—and quickly healed the wound on his palm. Ron had clearly reached his threshold for terror and panic: he didn't try and pull away when Voldemort did it, just watched with a blank expression as the cut sealed shut.

"A quick briefing, before we depart," Voldemort said, placing his wand back in his pocket. "You are going to play a very important role in this plan of mine… *both* of you. I need to make sure you know your lines. So pay *close* attention. If you so much as utter a single uninstructed word, then there *will* be death. Is this understood?"

Harry and Ron shared a despairing glance. What else could they possibly say?

"…Yes," Harry finally breathed. Ron swallowed and nodded.

Voldemort's magic swelled with pleasure, gold sparkling with exhilaration in a shroud of blackness.

The Dark Lord spoke, and Harry and Ron could do nothing but listen.

They arrived at exactly 3:59.

Voldemort disapparated with both of them, and as if things weren't bad enough, he brought Bellatrix along as well. Harry and Ron clung to each other when they landed, each one gripping the other's forearm like a life line.

There were no wards, there were no sinister enchantments or protective spells—Fred and George were relying completely on the fact that they had chosen a random basement of some muggle building in London to hide themselves. There was nothing at all preventing the Dark Lord from apparating directly into the room which he had just discovered using a brand of blood magic that Harry had never even known existed. Ron's blood, somehow tracing the blood of his siblings through whatever that silver instrument was and dark magic.

Their quiet apparation into the twins' hideout made for quite a scene.

Fred and George were sitting next to each other at a wooden table, papers with scribbled notes and a tall, silver microphone in front of them. The microphone emitted a strange energy; it must have been enchanted to broadcast their show. Fred had just pulled it closer to him, looking like he had been on the verge of speaking when Voldemort appeared before them—their brother and Harry Potter behind him, Bellatrix Lestrange at his side.

Fred's words went unspoken.

It was such a tense and suspended moment that it felt unreal. Fred and George's auras—which were similar to Ron's, only more of a rust-colored red than orange, and one of them was even more so—stilled, looking like frozen static. They both stared with expressions of such disbelief that they did not yet appear to be afraid.

Voldemort and Bellatrix didn't give them the chance to get that far.

Hexes went flying and Fred and George were disarmed, bound, and silenced in seconds. Bellatrix smiled maliciously as she swept them into the corner with a quick and wordless spell. They both attempted

to cry out, but no sound left their mouths.

Harry watched miserably as it happened, powerless to stop it. His heart broke as the twins, who had probably thought him dead just moments ago, stared up at him in obvious terror—Harry Potter, alive, at the Dark Lord's side… with eyes that were not his own.

Voldemort touched his shoulder, drawing his attention away from them. He guided both Harry and Ron towards the table, giving them a look that quite clearly said: *Obey.*

Reluctantly, they did.

Voldemort smiled as he too sat, taking the seat which Fred had occupied just moments ago. Bellatrix remained in the corner, towering over the twins with her wand pointed down at them.

Harry's stomach was doing summersaults as he sat there, thinking of how many people must be whispering passwords into their radios right now, tuning in to *Potterwatch*… Hopeful, expectant witches and wizards who were still resisting, who craved to hear the familiar voices of the usual hosts, Rodent and Rapier… and who would instead be met with the cold, cruel voice of Lord Voldemort.

…Hermione would be listening.

Wherever she was, however she was surviving, Hermione would undoubtedly be listening to every word.

Voldemort leaned forward. He looked so casual, sitting with his hands folded on the table in front of him and a smile on his lips. "Good evening," he said smoothly, his magic a dark and lustrous haze.

"…And thank you for listening to the very last broadcast of *Potterwatch.*"

Dangerous

Voldemort paused after his greeting, presumably to allow the severity of the situation to weigh on all of those who were listening. Harry could feel the blood draining from his face, envisioning Hermione's own reaction in that moment, wherever she was.

"Though I am sure such clarification is unnecessary, I want there to be no incorrect assumptions made by the end of this broadcast. This is your Lord and ruler speaking. The war is over. The side of the so-called light has lost, and I have won. Resistance is both futile and illegal, and continuing to rebel will result in punishments in accordance to the severity of your crimes. Consider this your official pardoning for listening to an unauthorized broadcast."

Harry's eyes flickered to the floor, where Fred and George were watching the Dark Lord with terror-filled eyes, their auras going mad with emotion. Guilt pooled in Harry's stomach.

Voldemort continued, and Harry's attention was once more on his shimmering magic which gleamed with such enthusiasm—a liveliness that was in great contrast to his cool composure. "We are entering into a new age… One which requires magical unity. We must stand as one. Witches and wizards between the ages of eleven and seventeen must attend Hogwarts, as education is a pillar for the foundation of the future. Muggle-borns must be registered officially with the Ministry of Magic. We must be far stricter with our ties to muggle society, and take a stronger stance on eliminating the threats which they pose. We are superior, and it is time that we begin the meticulous process of claiming our rightful place in this world. *Magic is might.*"

There was a clear definitiveness to his last words, his magic swelling with a fierce emotion. Harry and Ron shared a despairing look as he leaned a little bit closer to the microphone. His voice, when he spoke next, was slightly but notably softer.

"I speak now, Hermione Granger… directly to you."

Voldemort was silent for a long moment after saying this, holding his fingers to his lips and looking thoughtful. Everyone's magic was reacting in ways that made Harry's head spin—Voldemort's and Bellatrix's whirling in excitement, Ron, Fred, and George's quivering in dread.

"As of this moment, the only crime you stand accused of is refusing to register—and possibly conspiring against the Ministry of Magic, though this remains to be seen. Should you turn yourself in, these accusations shall be dealt with in an orderly, peaceful manner. The time for fleeing is past. There is nowhere to run. One way or another, you shall be brought to justice, as shall all who feel they can escape from the might of the Ministry of Magic. I can assure you, however, that the manner in which this occurs will make a very great difference in your judgement. It would be in your best interests to surrender willfully."

Voldemort's declaration that Hermione had only committed one crime with certainty was loaded with insinuations; as far as the current regime was concerned, this could not be further from the truth. Hermione Granger had *definitely* conspired against the Ministry, for a long time—not to mention that she'd blasted off Bellatrix's arm, blown up a portion of the Forbidden Forest, and disappeared right in front of the Dark Lord in a flash of phoenix fire.

Of course, Voldemort would never admit that a muggle-born had managed such things to the public.

"I understand that this is a very daunting decision," Voldemort went on. "The greatest one you shall ever make in your life, in fact. Such choices should not be made lightly. Because I am merciful, I am granting you the opportunity to consider your options for a time. Sleep on it."

His lips curled into the tiniest smirk, waiting several seconds before he continued. "Should you come to the wise decision to surrender, this is how you shall do so. Tomorrow, between the hours of eight and nine in the morning, go to the place in which you first found solace when you fled the wedding of Bill and Fleur Weasley. Go to the counter, where a muggle woman with dark hair will be working. Order anything you like.

"She will go into the back room and return to you with a portkey. It shall be an item you will recognize… and it will recognize you as well. It is a very *special* portkey, one which only you can activate, and one which requires not just a touch or a moment in time, but a very specific action in order to become activated. You're a *smart* girl; I trust that you shall figure out what this action is without issue."

Bellatrix failed to suppress a short, quiet laugh at this. Harry wondered whether it was loud enough to carry to the microphone, if

Hermione could hear her. Voldemort didn't seem concerned either way. "Once you have completed this small but meaningful task, the portkey shall activate, bringing you… to us."

Voldemort folded his hands on the table and looked meaningfully at Ron, whose face was as pale as a ghost. He seemed paralyzed under Voldemort's stare, and Harry felt a thrill of terror when Voldemort's magic twitched, impatient. If he or Ron screwed this up, Voldemort would have no issue giving Bellatrix the command to kill Fred or George.

Harry touched Ron's shoulder, drawing his focus away from the glower of Lord Voldemort to him. He nodded encouragingly, hoping that, despite his crimson eyes that were hardly reassuring, Ron would find the courage to persevere.

It worked. Ron nodded back, leaning closer to the microphone and speaking into it with a voice that was surprisingly level. "Hermione," he started, and his eyes welled with tears when he said her name. Harry had to look away; the emotion in Ron's face and magic all too much. He could imagine Hermione right now, her hand flying to her mouth when she heard Ron's voice coming from the radio, right after hearing the Dark Lord's.

"It's… It's not what you think. What *we* thought," he said. "We were wrong, Hermione. I see that now. It was all explained to me properly before my trial. The Ministry's new regime makes a lot of sense. The muggle-borns aren't being registered as some means of repression, it's for the good of everyone. We don't fully understand spontaneous magic, so it's important that such individuals are documented and studied. It's to make sure that it isn't dangerous—it's for everyone's safety, including the muggle-borns themselves."

He glanced at the Dark Lord, who nodded his approval. Ron turned back to the microphone, looking anything but relieved. "…I know that you're scared, but you don't have to be. The war is over, Hermione. If you just surrender and follow protocol, you'll be safe. You don't need to be afraid."

A tear slid down Ron's face. He quickly wiped it away, forcing himself to finish. "The Dark Lord is merciful. Even though I was accused of treason, my sentence was light. Beneficial, even. Working within the Ministry will be enlightening and rewarding… I even get to spend all day, every day with my brother. You know how much I *love* Percy."

For the briefest moment, Ron grinned, a slap-happy look on his face. Voldemort shot him a warning glare, and it vanished. "I-I'm grateful," he said hurriedly, his voice going up an octave. "So grateful, and… And I'm sure that if mercy can be granted to me, then it will be granted to you, too. I'll be here for you, Hermione. You don't need to run anymore."

He fell silent. Voldemort's eyes locked onto Harry's, his black aura glittering in expectation.

Harry and Ron were both fully aware that Hermione would not believe a single word that Ron had just said—as was the Dark Lord. This was all according to Voldemort's plan, though; everyone else who was listening might take Ron's words at face value, but some, especially Hermione, would hear the real message.

This was Voldemort's way of saying, *I have Ron Weasley, and I can and will do far, far worse things to him than make him act as my puppet if you don't submit.*

And maybe, if it were just Ron speaking, it wouldn't work. He and Hermione had essentially made a suicide pact, after all. They'd agreed to take each other out if it ever looked like they would become kidnapped.

But Hermione had failed and gone on the run instead, because she was pregnant—a fact which the Dark Lord was currently unaware of. Still, Harry thought that she might not give in if it was only Ron, because he knew that she would know that Ron would never, *ever* want her to turn herself in, no matter what he was forced to do. She would know that Ron would want her to run away, to leave the country and never look back.

But it wasn't just Ron.

Harry's heart sank as he pictured her, alone and terrified, staring at the radio with tears in her eyes. Right now, at this very moment, Hermione still thought Harry was dead. And while many of the people listening might not recognize Harry's voice… Hermione would.

Harry took a deep breath, his heart aching as he prepared to deliver the one line that could possibly make Voldemort persuade her.

Because Hermione had never once abandoned Harry. Not once.

"Hermione," he said, his voice raw and shaking. Voldemort's aura was

dancing in satisfaction because of it—the more broken Harry sounded with his plea, the better.

"…Please come home."

Voldemort raised his wand and flicked it at the microphone, effectively vanishing it. All across the country, the *Potterwatch* broadcast would be turning back to music, to static, to radio silence.

"Very good," the Dark Lord said as he stood, a crooked smile on his face. Bellatrix laughed, and he turned his attention towards the two struggling, silenced wizards on the floor.

"Thank you, gentlemen, for letting me commandeer your little radio show. Now, what to do with you…"

Fred and George inched away from Voldemort as much as they could in their bindings. "You said you wouldn't kill them!" Harry yelled, jumping to his feet. "You promised you wouldn't if we did everything you said!"

Ron got up as well, but he only nodded fervently, unable to raise his voice to the Dark Lord in the same manner that Harry could. Voldemort stared at Harry, eyes flickering thoughtfully across his face. Harry got the feeling that he was resisting the urge to touch him, his aura darkening with a hunger that Harry was growing disturbingly accustomed to.

Though he would never do that in front of anyone else, surely.

"I know I have said it before, and that you are fully aware of it, by now…" the Dark Lord said, nearly sighing. "But fate truly *does* favor Lord Voldemort."

A series of *cracks* made Harry and Ron both jump; Ron let out a whimper of surprise and grabbed Harry's arm. Three wizards whom Harry could only assume were Snatchers appeared. The moment they realized that it was Voldemort himself who had summoned them, they all fell to one knee, looking terrified to be in the Lord's presence so unexpectedly.

"Place these two men under arrest, for the crimes of treason by broadcasting an unauthorized radio program in opposition of the Ministry of Magic," he said calmly. The Snatchers nodded and got to their feet, obeying without question. Harry, though he desperately wanted to, didn't voice his protests—not yet.

He would get them out of this. Harry would, somehow, in some way, save Fred and George from a life spent in Azkaban. He had managed to save Ron, and he would do the same for them.

…He was unsure if he would be able to do the same for Hermione.

"Bellatrix," the Dark Lord said once Fred, George, and the Snatchers were gone. "You know what to do."

"Yes, my Lord. At once."

Bellatrix disapparated. Harry wondered wildly what he'd sent her to do, certain that it was nothing good.

The Dark Lord was smiling when he turned back to Harry and Ron. He put a hand on each of their shoulders, like some mockery of a proud parent who was pleased with how his children had performed in a school play. "Shall we?" he said, eyes glittering. *"Ron?"* he added, because he seemed to derive a sick sense of gratification at the way Ron's face turned putrid colors whenever he said his name.

Without waiting for a response, the three vanished, leaving the empty basement behind.

They arrived, to Harry's surprise, back in the bedroom he'd been staying in. Ron looked equally bewildered. He seemed at the end of his rope, so overwhelmed with suspense and confusion as he was.

Voldemort clearly didn't care. He lifted his hands from their shoulders when they landed, and Ron backed several paces away, bumping into the vanity and scaring himself when he spotted what was only his own reflection. It promptly told him he looked a right mess.

Harry half-wished Ron wasn't there. He had a feeling that the Dark Lord in the presence of someone else would act very differently than if it were just them.

"I shall be leaving you two here," Voldemort said. "The door is open. The Malfoys are aware that you shall be staying with them for an indefinite amount of time; Narcissa shall be with you shortly. As there is no possibility that Hermione Granger shall be arriving before eight in the morning tomorrow, I shall not return until that time. I would recommend that you rest."

He turned, surely just about to disappear again, when Harry reached

out and grabbed his wrist. It was an instinctual reaction that surprised even him when he succeeded. Voldemort glared at his daring, yet at the same time, his magic reeled, darkening with a sense of need that he was currently repressing.

There was no light or warmth now, though. "Wait," Harry said, heart pounding. He couldn't stomach the thought of Voldemort leaving without some kind of reassurance, as unlikely as he was to get it. His mind raced as he tried to come up with something to say to make him stay, to talk. To *endear* himself to him, as Narcissa would say. "Why did you do it like that?" he asked. "Why make her wait until tomorrow? Is it… Is it just because you like the idea of her freaking out all night, or something?"

Harry's voice, which had started so hesitantly, was furious by the end of his last question. Voldemort deftly twisted his wrist so that he was the one holding onto Harry instead. Ron watched the interaction with a frightened look on his face. "Because coffee shops close in the evenings, Harry, and it would look strange to have an Imperiused muggle operating on my orders at night," he answered condescendingly. "That, and I have other matters to attend to before that time."

"…Oh." Harry hated that this simple explanation made his face burn. "Er—what is the portkey? What will she have to do?" he went on quickly.

"It is unimportant. If we are fortunate, you shall know tomorrow."

He released Harry's hand. "Wait!" Harry shouted again, making Voldemort glare but pause. "I'm sorry, I just—what was that magic? That silver thing you used, with the fog and the snake? I've n-never seen such magic performed before. It was *incredible*."

Harry knew he'd succeeded in piquing his interest. Voldemort's annoyed expression softened only slightly, but his magic swelled at the word *incredible.* Harry repressed a grin—the Dark Lord truly was the most arrogant man alive.

He also ignored Ron's boggled expression, who was staring at Harry like he'd just sprouted an extra head. "That was a *Circuitus,*" Voldemort explained. "An extremely rare and powerful magical object. Dumbledore held one of very few in existence. They are generally used to confirm abstract ideas and visions, but they can be… *persuaded* to give more information, if the wizard is skilled enough

and the right ingredients provided."

"Like blood," Harry murmured, glancing at Ron.

"Yes," Voldemort agreed. "Blood magic is a very powerful brand of sorcery. It can forge connections, create unbreakable bonds, bridge gaps… That method of finding his brothers worked especially well, because they share two parents. Their blood is very similar."

"Would it have worked, otherwise?" Harry said, dreading the answer. "Like… If they had only shared one parent?"

"It may not have been as quick or simple, but yes, ultimately—under my influence, at least. Though it is easier with direct siblings, or parents and their children."

Ron fainted.

It happened so quickly that Harry couldn't even try and catch him. One moment Ron was standing there, looking sickly but steady; the next, he was on the floor, the back of his skull hitting the wood with an unnervingly loud *thud* which sounded very much like a bowling ball being dropped.

"Shit! Ron!" Harry fell to his knees at his side. He slapped his face a few times, trying to rouse him, but it was no use. Ron was out *cold.*

"I think you may have killed him," Harry said, though he was fairly sure that this was untrue. Though he was undoubtedly unconscious, Ron was breathing normally, and his magic was still present.

Voldemort looked bored. "If merely being in my presence killed him, then he was hardly worth keeping alive in the first place," he drawled.

"I'm serious, he's probably really hurt!"

"Probably." Voldemort offered up nothing else in consideration of Ron. "I have more important matters to tend to. I know it may come as a shock to you, Harry, but you are not my only concern."

Harry stood, realizing then that Ron passing out may have been a blessing in disguise. "No," he said, agreeing with the Dark Lord, "I'm sure I'm not. Just the most… *fascinating* one."

He held his breath, wondering if Voldemort would take the bait or not. His scarlet eyes darted down to Ron again, like he was making

sure that he truly was unconscious. Seemingly satisfied, he refocused on Harry. "Yes," he agreed, stepping closer to him. His dark magic glittered and whirled.

"…I would never deny that."

Then he was holding Harry's face in his hands, touching his forehead to his and bringing forth such a powerful wave of light that Harry's knees almost buckled. Voldemort sighed, drinking in the sensation of it all, basking in the feeling of wholeness.

Harry didn't say or do anything for a time, only closed his eyes and let Voldemort relish the respite which his intact soul offered. It was difficult to keep his own mind level, despite the temptation to also sink into that warmth in a state of complete thoughtlessness.

He had to *focus.*

It was bizarre how difficult it was for Harry to act, then. He'd flown past dragons, he'd faced off against dementors, he'd escaped inferi—he'd even reached out and touched the Dark Lord of his own volition before. But there was something about this moment which was more frightening than all of those memories combined. Perhaps it was because Harry moved with an underhanded intent, this time. With purpose.

Harry slowly raised one hand, trembling as he placed it on the Dark Lord's neck. The warmth escalated at the increased contact, so pleasant and inviting. Harry wondered if Voldemort could feel his emotions through all of the blissful light, if he could sense Harry's nervousness. Probably. Harry wasn't sure if that would work in his favor or not.

"You won't just leave them there, will you?" he asked quietly, their foreheads still touching, his eyes still closed. "You won't damn them to Azkaban forever?"

Voldemort didn't answer. Harry waited, expecting the warmth to abruptly vanish at any moment, for the Dark Lord to release him, tell him that he would do whatever he damn well pleased, and leave Harry alone with his friend who was likely experiencing a concussion to drown in anxiety for the night.

"…No."

Voldemort's reply was the softest whisper. Harry could feel the heat of

his breath on his face, making his heart beat faster. And then, before Harry could process that response and what it meant, he was lost.

Voldemort closed the small gap between them, claiming his lips in a gentle, severely uncharacteristic manner. The warmth that exploded at the contact was overwhelming. Harry gasped, and when his lips parted with the sound Voldemort's tongue dove in, taking advantage, claiming his mouth and—

Oh, God.

This had never happened before. They had never touched in such an intimate way while Voldemort was calling forth that light, tapping into the connection to Harry's soul which the horcrux provided. It was such a powerful sensation that Harry's spine felt like it had been lit on fire, hot, electric currents shooting throughout his body.

His knees did buckle, then. Voldemort easily caught him around the waist, his magic amplifying, glittering in a haze of lust and wrapping around Harry with a pressing sense of possessiveness.

Unsure of how it had happened, Harry found himself with his back against the wall. The Dark Lord was holding him against it and ravaging his mouth, his nails digging into his hips, his magic darkening, wanting more, more, *more*—

A low, pain-filled groan caused Voldemort to stop what he was doing and turn, the light and warmth dissipating as he released his vicious hold on Harry and stepped away. Ron had moaned, though his eyes were still closed and he did not appear to be cognizant.

Harry, who hadn't been standing on his own, slid to the floor: the second time that he'd been reduced to such a state after being ravaged by Voldemort. He was panting, feeling far too overheated for it to mean anything good. Voldemort looked down at him with a stone cold expression on his face.

His magic however, told a very different story. It was vibrating and glinting, emitting a plethora of emotions that tangled together—a slight amount of shame that he had just lost control of himself like that, a sense of both relief and spite, simultaneously, that they'd been interrupted, and then, mostly, overpoweringly—

Oh, god.

"…You are not my only concern," he repeated, but it sounded like he

was saying it more to himself than to Harry.

He disappeared.

In his absence, Harry realized what a dangerous game he had begun.

Do Not

Harry's skin felt like it was on fire. He sat with his back against the wall, his thoughts racing with revelations that were as shocking as they were unwelcome. Harry's heart was still pounding as he forced his mind not to wander into dark, dangerous places where it should never dare to go.

Unwelcome, Harry said to himself with decisiveness. *Absolutely unwelcome.*

Feeling too unsteady to stand, Harry crawled the short distance on the floor so that he was next to Ron, then sprawled out on his back next to him. Ron was passed out, but Harry was confident that he was fine—physically, anyway. His magic was undulating in a peaceful manner, and Harry was pretty sure that if he was in mortal peril, this would not be the case.

Harry sighed heavily. "What a shit situation we're in, mate," he muttered, and even though he was not conscious, it did feel nice to have Ron by his side again.

They were not left alone for long. Only a few moments passed before there was a soft knock at the door and Narcissa entered. Her deep, navy aura was beautiful.

It became worried, however, when she spotted Harry on the floor next to an unconscious Ronald Weasley. "'Lo," Harry said while still on his back, too tired to attempt being polite.

"Oh, my—what's happened to him? To *you*?"

She rushed over so that she was kneeling beside Harry, who at least had the decency to sit up, then. "I'm fine," he said, forcing a smile. "And I think he's all right, too—Ron just sort of, er, passed out. From shock," he clarified.

"Oh." Narcissa frowned and retracted her wand, pausing before waving it over Ron with intricate wrist movements, saying nothing. His body glowed a dull, greenish color. It was a light that traveled up and down his spine before turning white, then dissipating.

"He's not suffering any internal damage," Narcissa said, interpreting that bit of magic. "He's just unconscious—like being hit with a

powerful stunning spell. I could wake him up…?"

Harry shook his head. "I think it may be kinder to just let him stay like this."

"I think you may be right," Narcissa agreed. She stood and reached down, helping Harry to his feet before pointing her wand at Ron again. She levitated him into the air, guiding his body so that he was laying on the bed which Harry had slept in last night. She moved him so skillfully that Ron didn't even twitch when he landed on top of the comforter, his head on a pillow and looking deceptively peaceful.

"You're really good at that," Harry commented.

Narcissa smiled and pocketed her wand. "Wordless spell-casting is one of my specialties," she said. She then crossed her arms and looked at Harry, her expression suddenly judgmental. "You need to eat."

"I don't know if I—"

Narcissa cut him off with the clicking of her tongue, waved her wand, and conjured up a chair and a tray with a bowl of soup on it, as well as a tea kettle and a cup. "I made this earlier," she said, motioning for him to sit. "It's broth, you should be able to drink it easily enough. And you definitely need to take another one of these."

She pointed towards a nutrition elixir, which sat at the edge of the tray. Harry felt nauseous at just the sight of it. "Maybe two," she added, giving Harry another scrutinizing look.

"Please don't make me."

Narcissa's lip twitched. "All right, just one—but only if you finish the soup. And I'm not leaving until you do."

Harry laughed as she conjured another chair and sat across from him. "Yes, ma'am," he said.

"Narcissa," she corrected, fixing him with a stern look—one which didn't soften until Harry picked up the spoon and started eating the broth dutifully. Narcissa smiled, then, and her posture relaxed. "Have I ever told you about my sorting?"

Harry's brows rose in surprise at the question, as they both knew that she hadn't. Clearly, she was just asking so that she could tell him another story.

Harry grinned as he listened to Narcissa, who told him all about her first time walking into Hogwarts, and how the hat had truly considered putting her in Hufflepuff, telling her that she had a very gentle, loyal heart, deep down—a declaration which had terrified the eleven-year-old girl, who begged to be placed in Slytherin. Eventually, the hat obliged, and Narcissa Black went on to not disappoint her family.

Harry almost told her about his own, questionable sorting, but decided against it.

"It's our choice, in the end," Narcissa finished, staring detachedly at Ron's sleeping form. "No matter what our inclinations are, we make the final decision… and it's those choices that make all the difference."

Narcissa eventually left them, though not before she offered to show Harry around the house and to another bedroom. Harry declined, not wanting to leave Ron's side in case he woke up.

Time seemed to be moving at an unnaturally slow pace. Harry stared at the clock, lamenting that it was only ten in the evening. He sat on the foot of the bed and sighed, looking at Ron with an intense jealousy. What he wouldn't give to just pass out and feel nothing for a while.

As though the thought had struck him, Ron's magic stirred. He groaned softly and his muscles tensed. He was waking up.

Harry moved so that he was standing at the side of the bed, but he wasn't the first thing that Ron saw when his eyes flew open. Ron looked up, and upon seeing his own reflection directly above him, he did exactly what Harry had. Ron screamed, and it was the highest, most feminine sound that Harry had ever heard come out of Ron's mouth. His orange cloud of magic fluctuated in sporadic bursts.

"Ron! It's—"

Harry was interrupted when Ron shot up and looked at him—Harry Potter with his bright, red eyes—and screamed again. He fell off the bed, landing with a *thud* and taking the whole comforter and several pillows with him.

Harry couldn't help it. He laughed.

He knew there was nothing funny about their situation at all, but

watching Ron wake up and scream like a ten-year-old girl was easily the funniest thing he'd witnessed in a long time. Harry laughed so hard that he was doubled over, almost falling to the floor as well.

Ron eventually gathered himself enough to stand, trying to look angry but failing. Harry stopped laughing, but he couldn't wipe the massive grin from his face. "Are you okay?" he managed to ask.

"Oh, *yeah*," Ron drawled, rubbing the back of his head. "Never better."

There was a beat of silence before they *both* started laughing. Harry suspected there was something irreparably wrong with the pair of them, to find humor in anything, all things considered.

"Why is there a mirror up there!?" Ron exclaimed, dumbfounded. "Whose room *is* this?"

"I don't know," Harry answered. "I don't know much of anything, to be honest. I try not to ask questions when I can stop myself."

Ron shook his head and sat. "Blimey, I think I just had three heart attacks in a row… Shame it didn't kill me." He looked up at his reflection mournfully.

"Don't say that," Harry said as he sat next to him.

"My head feels like it's been hit with a bludger. What happened?"

"You uh, passed out. Pretty spectacularly, might I add. I didn't get a chance to *try* and catch you before your head hit the floor."

Ron frowned, looking thoughtful, then afraid as it all came rushing back to him. He looked about the room, like he thought the Dark Lord might still be there, lurking in the corner.

Which wasn't exactly out of character for the Dark Lord, but Harry chose not to voice that unhappy fact. "He left," Harry said, and Ron exhaled in relief. "It's just us… until the morning, I imagine."

"Shit," Ron said, looking at the clock. "Harry, what's going to happen if she actually does what he said? If she comes here?"

Harry didn't give him an answer. He didn't have one. "And… and the fact that she's pregnant," he went on, looking haunted. "I-if you-know-who finds out about that, then can't he…?"

His voice trailed off, but Harry didn't need him to finish his question

to know what he was thinking. Would Voldemort be able to find Hermione while she was pregnant, using that same brand of dark magic he had used to find the twins?

"I don't know," Harry said. "I… I guess that depends…?"

Ron looked at Harry imploringly, grabbing his shoulder uncomfortably tight. "When do they have blood of their own? How does magic differentiate between individuals like that? When does a-a *fetus* become a *person* with a soul and blood and magic of its own?"

"I don't know," Harry repeated. "But those are very, very loaded questions, and I kind of want to stay as far away from them as possible."

"She's *doomed*, Harry," Ron lamented. "She's doomed! If she doesn't come tomorrow—and she probably won't—then you-know-who will eventually find out, and he'll track her down, and then that will be it! Unless…"

He released Harry's shoulder's, looking suddenly hopeful. "Unless, you think she might know about that kind of magic? Maybe she's aware that people can be tracked using blood like that, and she'll, you know… terminate the pregnancy before it's too late?"

Harry's jaw dropped, momentarily speechless. He doubted that Hermione knew about that specific type of dark magic, despite all her vast knowledge. Voldemort himself had said that the silver object he'd used was a rare one, that Dumbledore had one of very few *Circuituses* in the world. The likelihood of what Ron was hoping for seemed very improbable: that Hermione would terminate the pregnancy, go on the run, and never get caught by the Dark Lord... especially considering that the reason Hermione had run in the first place was because she was pregnant.

Yet this was clearly the hope which Ron was clinging to. Harry didn't have the heart to disagree. "Maybe," he said, trying to sound genuine. "This is Hermione we're talking about, here."

"Yeah," Ron said, nodding. "Yeah, she… She might know. She could still get away… But… Harry, what if she *does* come here?"

"He'll keep his word," Harry said firmly, though he was uncertain. "He will."

"That's rubbish. You know he'll probably just kill her anyway. Despite

whatever he's told you, even if she *does* come willingly and surrender…"

Ron's eyes were hollow as he stared at the floor. Harry wanted to say something, *anything* to wipe the pained expression from his face, but he couldn't find it in himself to do so.

He couldn't, because he knew that Ron was right. The possibility that Voldemort would decide to rid himself of the threat of Hermione Granger permanently was *very* real.

"I never thought I'd say this," Ron continued when Harry remained silent. He looked up, and the tiny smile he gave was heartbreaking.

"I hope I never see Hermione again."

"Me too," Harry whispered.

They were quiet for a long time. Ron wiped his eyes with the back of his sleeve. When he glanced at Harry again, he flinched. "Merlin, those are creepy. It's hard to look at you." It wasn't difficult to figure out that he was talking about Harry's delightful new eyes. Ron frowned and pointed at his face. "Also—that's impossible."

"Sorry?"

"That. Your eyes, your vision being fixed. It's not possible. Magic can't fix bad eyesight. Do you think wizards like my brother and dad would wear glasses if they didn't have to? *It's not possible*."

Ron stared at Harry's face with an intense look, like he might be able to make Harry's eyes turn green again by sheer force of will.

"Er," Harry said, unsure of how to proceed.

"I reject this reality," Ron announced.

Harry laughed, unable not to at Ron's overly serious expression. Ron smiled too, and dropped his arm. "This is all so fucked, Harry," he said. "Nothing makes sense anymore. People don't even look the same! What the hell is going on with you-know-who? How'd he get a new body—*again?*"

"Dunno," Harry lied.

Ron shuddered like he'd just gotten a chill. "You know, I think he's scarier now than when he looked like he was part snake," he admitted.

"It's so freaky, seeing someone that looks almost human but then has those fucking crazy eyes. Sorry," he added, seeing as Harry now had them as well.

"I'm not offended," Harry muttered.

"But he is, isn't he? Creepier now, I mean," Ron went on. "He's fucking terrifying. Being on trial with him staring down on me was the scariest experience of my life."

Ron gripped his hair with both hands in frustration. "He's just such a conniving bastard!" he exclaimed, suddenly angry instead of disturbed. "Everything he does, everything he says! And it's not just *what* he does, it's *how* he does it, you know? Like, everything he said on that broadcast was so precise, worded so that no one else would be able to figure out what place he was talking about, so that no one listening could conceivably go there to stop her. Only you, me, and Hermione know it's that muggle coffee shop. And what did he mean, when he was talking about the portkey? What does he want her to do?"

It was a question that had been plaguing Harry too. He had no idea.

"Well, with any luck she'll never have to figure it out, because hopefully she doesn't go," Ron went on when Harry said nothing. "I hope she just… gets rid of the baby and disappears, hiding somewhere far, far away from here."

Harry murmured in agreement.

"…You know she won't though," Ron said, morbid. "Hermione would never just run away. She'll stick around, she'll find what's left of the Order and start rebuilding a resistance. You know that's what she'll do, if she doesn't come."

Harry *did* know that. He hadn't wanted to voice his opinion on the matter, preferring to let Ron cling to the thought that she might flee—but they both knew Hermione Granger too well. If she did not surrender for the potential safety of her friends and unborn child, then she would fight the Dark Lord and his new regime tooth and nail, to the death.

"Yeah," Harry said, his voice hoarse. "Yeah. I know."

They didn't talk anymore, after that. They sat in silence, unable to sleep and watching the clock as time slipped away, each second

bringing them closer to what would either be the true end of the war, or the beginning of a new one.

They were gathered in the foyer.

Narcissa had come to get them at half past seven that morning, wordlessly guiding them to the hall in the front of the manor where, presumably, the portkey would bring Hermione—if she chose to take it.

Lucius, Draco, and Bellatrix were there, too. The Malfoys were standing against the wall like they wanted to be anywhere else but in their own home; Draco adamantly did not look at them when Harry and Ron entered.

Then there was Voldemort.

The Dark Lord was standing in the center of the hall with his eyes closed. It was the exact same stance he'd taken in the Forbidden Forest and again in Azkaban, like he was deep in prayer. The Deathstick was held between his fingers, black against white. His magic was calm.

Bellatrix was at his side, her own aura quivering with excitement. When Harry and Ron entered with Narcissa, she smiled maliciously at them. Harry's blood boiled at the sight.

Voldemort did not even open his eyes upon their arrival, looking as lifeless and cold as a marble sculpture.

They waited.

Harry and Ron stood a few feet away from the Malfoys, near the wall to the left of the Dark Lord. Narcissa grabbed both her husband's and her son's hands, looking extremely stressed.

For a moment, Harry was distracted from his anxiety by their magic. Narcissa's dark and lovely navy; Lucius's, which was a dark gray; and Draco's, which was much lighter, like clouds and light. Their auras melded together when they were close, almost familiarly. It was strange and beautiful.

The clock struck eight.

Hermione did not appear.

Harry was certain in that moment that this meant she would not come

at all.

Hermione was punctual if nothing else, and he was sure that she had probably come to a decision last night about which course of action she would take. The fact that she did not arrive right when she could have made Harry think that she had chosen to fight.

But, then again, he was unsure of what Voldemort required that she do to trigger the portkey. Maybe it was something that took some time.

They waited.

Five minutes, ten minutes minutes, twenty minutes. They all glanced continuously at the clock on the wall, growing more nervous as time went on. Bellatrix began pacing, her heels clicking against the wooden floor like a metronome. The Malfoys eventually sat, sitting around a small table in the corner. Harry and Ron remained standing, their backs leaning against the wall. Only Voldemort remained where he was, perfectly still, his magic unmoving. It was the longest hour of Harry's life. It seemed infinitely longer than the hour *he* had been given to answer the Dark Lord's summons, back when he had made his way through the Forbidden Forest, prepared to die.

It was not until five minutes to nine that Voldemort's aura started to stir.

The cloud of glittering gold and black began to twitch, irritated, *angry*. Even though Harry was the only one who could sense it so precisely, everyone else must have felt the sinister energy emanating from him as well. Draco, who had been staring at the chandelier, fidgeted in his seat. Lucius and Narcissa shared despairing looks. Bellatrix stopped pacing.

Harry and Ron grabbed each other's forearms at the same time. Time was almost up.

Everyone waited with baited breath. Voldemort did not open his eyes until there was one minute left. His magic was moving, whirling and furious, but his posture remained rigid.

The clock struck nine.

"She did not come," he hissed, his voice icy and soft.

Everyone in the room looked terrified, each wondering who would be

the one to suffer the wrath of Voldemort's displeasure. Harry shifted so that Ron was behind him, as he had a dark feeling about who that person might be.

Harry knew what Voldemort's next line would be before he said it. The Dark Lord opened his eyes, not looking at anyone when he spoke.

"I thought she would come."

No one breathed.

The walls started screaming.

Harry's hands flew to his ears, the cry was so shrill and high. It was a familiar shriek—a caterwauling curse. It emanated all around them, like Malfoy manor was a living, tormented entity. The Malfoys all jumped to their feet at the sound, looking horrified and backing away, Narcissa clinging to Draco protectively. Bellatrix, however, started laughing, and Voldemort…

Such a sinister smile could only mean one thing.

Harry thought he might faint, the panic which gripped him was so strong. It was only Ron's hand clasping his arm that kept him grounded, trapped in this moment, this nightmare. A loud *crack* resounded in the hall. The screaming ceased, and Bellatrix stopped laughing.

There she was.

Hermione had appeared in the center of the foyer, and in her hand she held…

A knife?

Hermione was holding a blade in her right hand, and it was dripping with blood. Harry stared, shocked as his eyes flickered to her other arm, which had the sleeve ripped off and was bleeding profusely.

Mudblood.

The knife had been the portkey.

Harry felt bile clawing at the back of his throat. Voldemort had not only required that Hermione cut herself to activate the portkey—the knife which would recognize her by her blood—but had forced her to re-carve the entirety of the word into her arm, the scar she could not

rid herself of, which Bellatrix Lestrange had branded onto her forever.

Mudblood.

She looked *horrible.*

Hermione's skin was pale and tinged a slight blue color, unnatural and sickly. Upon seeing her, Harry was struck with a memory, an old man's voice echoing in his head as though from a different life:

"*Oh, surely not. So crude… Blood…"*

Harry was going to be sick.

Hermione dropped the knife, looking frail but somehow standing tall. Despite her awful appearance, what caught Harry most off guard was her *magic.* It was a deep, reddish violet, and though it was currently in a weakened state, it moved and looked very similar to Bellatrix's magic.

Very similar.

"Ha!"

With a flourish and a shout, Bellatrix cast a spell, and a wand came flying from Hermione's pocket—Bellatrix's wand. It soared straight into the dark witch's outstretched, metallic hand, and the moment she caught it her magic danced in triumph. Her wand, too, emitted a bright and vibrant aura—back in its rightful master's possession once more.

"No!" Ron screamed, rushing forward. "Hermione, no! *No!"*

"Take him to the cells," Voldemort commanded, his eyes never straying from Hermione. Instantly, Bellatrix obeyed, hitting Ron with a curse which bound and gagged him in a flash. Harry had to fight the powerful urge to try and help him, knowing that doing so could only make the situation worse. He watched helplessly as Bellatrix laughed and dragged Ron from the room with a spell, who struggled against his constraints in vain, his shouts stifled.

Hermione never looked at him.

Not when he screamed, not when Bellatrix hexed him. The moment Hermione appeared in Malfoy manor, her eyes had only flickered for a moment to Harry's before landing on Voldemort's, and she hadn't

looked away yet.

Voldemort's own eyes were gleaming as he met hers, unwavering.

His magic was an energetic cloud of black, glistening and whirling. Harry looked back and forth between the two, his heart pounding as he realized what must be happening. Voldemort was using Legilimency, seeing Hermione's thoughts, delving into her mind.

By the way that Hermione was standing there, staring back at him, unflinching, it was clear that she was putting up no resistance whatsoever. Right now, a silent, one-sided conversation was happening. Right now, in this moment, Voldemort was deciding Hermione Granger's fate.

The Dark Lord's magic only became more spirited as time went on. His smile became more sinister. Whatever it was he was seeing, it pleased him immensely.

"…Hermione Granger."

Voldemort's voice was soft and disarming. Harry nearly lost it, barely resisting the overwhelming impulse to throw himself in front of her, to protect her, to do *something,* but he knew doing anything at all would have the opposite effect. If Harry did a single thing to anger Voldemort now, he might kill her just out of spite.

Hermione didn't react when Voldemort said her name, like Ron always did. She only stood and waited, her chin out and her arm dripping blood on the floor.

Mudblood.

"Are you familiar with the phrase, 'Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer'?" the Dark Lord asked.

"…Yes," Hermione answered, her voice cracking and raw. Then her lips curled into a tiny smile.

"A muggle man said that."

Narcissa gasped and Lucius pulled his wife and son closer to him. Harry's jaw dropped, both amazed at Hermione's daring and horrified that she would say such a thing.

Astoundingly, the Dark Lord only returned her smile. "Correct," he

murmured, stepping closer to her. His eyes flickered down to Hermione's injury, his magic whirling hungrily. His smile widened.

"Five points to Gryffindor."

Voldemort grabbed her wrist like a viper ensnaring its prey, and pressed the Elder Wand to her left forearm. For a wild moment, Harry thought he was going to heal her.

He was only partially right.

"*Morsmordre."*

Hermione's knees buckled and she screamed, a blood-curdling cry that was far worse than the caterwauling curse.

No.

Harry watched in absolute disbelief as the bleeding cuts were covered with what looked like black ink swirling on her skin, forming into a serpent which protruded from the mouth of a skull. He shook his head, his hands in his hair, unable to process even as he witnessed it happening, because Voldemort could not be branding *Hermione* with the Dark Mark, it *could not be—*

"You belong to *me*, now," the Dark Lord hissed, dropping Hermione's arm. She fell to the floor, howling in pain. Voldemort flicked his wand and the scream was stolen from her throat, silenced. "Your mind is *mine.* Your every thought, your every idea, your every concern, is *mine*."

Voldemort's magic was building, swelling with his power, suffocating. The Malfoys were all cowering together, shaking while they watched with huge eyes, as shocked and as terrified as Harry was.

"There is *nowhere* in this world where you can run from me. There will *never* be one moment in which you could hope to escape from my ownership. You are *mine,* and your obedience will be *absolute.* The very second you think to cross me, you will *remember."*

Hermione was clutching at her arm, still screaming in agony, though no sound came out. Voldemort towered over her, his magic continuing to build to monstrous proportions, infecting the hall with his power. Unnatural winds stirred the air, causing the chandelier to shimmer and shake.

"The moment you think to undermine me, you will remember your filthy, muggle parents in Australia, and how I will tear them apart, *slowly*. The second you think to oppose my rule, you will remember that the unborn child you carry can be killed before it has even drawn a *breath*."

The impossible winds blew more fiercely, and the lights flickered. Hermione continued to scream in silent suffering, tears now streaming down her face as she held her arm to her chest, which Harry was sure was burning with an unfathomable pain.

Voldemort was losing control. His power was too great; he was going to bring the entire manor to the ground, he was going to kill her with his devastating magic alone.

"Stop!" Harry cried out, unable to watch any longer. He tried to go and stand in front of her, to shield her from Voldemort's wrath, but he couldn't. There was a force of some kind which was impossible to move beyond, keeping him from her.

Voldemort carried on, ignoring Harry, intent only on filling Hermione's mind with crushing, immeasurable fear. "You will remember this moment forever, Hermione Granger," he seethed, and she was on her side now, sobbing and writhing. "You will—"

"Stop!" Harry shouted again. "Stop it, Volde—"

"Do. *Not."*

Voldemort's focus snapped to Harry. The two words alone were far more frightening than anything else he could have said, because Harry's mind immediately supplied a dozen possibilities: Do not interrupt, say that word, dare to speak, move, *breathe*—

Harry was flung backwards, his skull colliding with the wall behind him before he fell to the floor. His ears rang. His vision went dark for a moment before the world came back into focus, though everything was blurred when it did.But he could see that Voldemort's tempestuous fury had ceased, the winds had stopped… and the Dark Lord's magic was its usual, glittering haze of darkness, deceptively beautiful.

Voldemort stared down at Hermione. "Congratulations, Death Eater," he said with the slightest hint of amusement.

"I shall be seeing you… *frequently*."

He then strode from the hall, passing the Malfoys, who cowered reverently as he passed.

He didn't so much as spare Harry another glance before he vanished.

The moment he was gone, Hermione's sobs became audible. Harry scrambled across the floor as quickly as he could to get to her, shaking as he pulled her to his chest, where she cried into his shoulder and held him with what must have been the last of her strength.

It was like a wall came crashing down. Harry started crying with her, a wave of emotion so strong washing over him that he thought he might drown in it.

"You shouldn't have come," Harry whispered, his hands tangled in the mess of her hair, breathing in her familiar scent. She only cried harder.

"You shouldn't have come."

It Makes You Human

Hermione must have been extremely fatigued, because her chest-heaving sobs soon quieted into whimpers, and her grip on Harry's shoulders weakened. Harry rubbed her back and forced his own tears away, trying to put on a brave face. He needed to be strong for her.

Just before she approached, Harry sensed Narcissa's familiar magic. It sparked with liveliness, and when she leaned over to speak to them, she had a sense of purpose about her, her face stern.

"Can you stand?"

It took a moment for Hermione to realize that Mrs. Malfoy was speaking to *her*. Her magic was quivering and anxious as she looked up. Harry tried not to think of how closely it resembled Bellatrix's.

Hermione shook her head. Harry adjusted her so that she was no longer leaning on him, moving to stand so that he could help her up himself. "Here, I can—"

"No."

Narcissa cut Harry's offer off with a single word, snapping in her family's direction—the corner from which her husband and son had not yet moved. "Draco, come here. Help me move her to a guest room."

"He's not touching her," Harry retaliated, glaring at Draco. "I'm *fine*, *I* can help her—"

The second Harry stood and went to pull Hermione up, he realized how wrong he was. He was struck with such a strong spell of dizziness that Narcissa had to hold *him* steady, grabbing him about the waist as white spots danced across his eyes.

"Child! You were just flung across the hall, you've hit your head—you are *injured!"*

"It's… Harry."

Narcissa sighed and lowered him back onto the ground, right next to Hermione. "Draco!" she shouted "Over here, *now!*"

Harry was still seeing stars when Draco finally heeded her, but

nothing could stop the overwhelming, somewhat irrational urgency to not let *Draco Malfoy* lay a finger on Hermione, and to help her himself. "Don't touch her, Malfoy, I—"

"Here." Narcissa held out her hand to Hermione, offering to be the one to assist her. Hermione looked as astounded as she did miserable—and skeptical on top of that. Narcissa wasn't deterred. "I'm just going to show you to a room. I have a salve that will help lessen the pain…"

Hermione's bloodshot eyes fell to her forearm, almost trance-like, staring at the vividly black Dark Mark like she thought she must be dreaming. Harry could hardly blame her. He felt the same way.

"Come."

Hermione finally accepted Narcissa's outstretched hand. Her fingers were trembling as she did, but Narcissa pulled her up and supported her weight with a surprising ease. Harry had to appreciate how calm and in-control she was at the moment, while everyone else around her —he, Harry, whose ears were still ringing; her son, who looked like he might be sick at any moment; Lucius, still standing in the corner, frozen and useless—was so visibly shaken.

He wondered if it was a skill all mothers had.

"Draco, help Harry up, we'll take them to the nearest guest room, here in the west wing…"

Draco made a face as though his mother had just asked him to foster a dozen blast-ended skrewts, but he didn't argue. He reached down to pull Harry to his feet, who immediately refused.

"I don't need your help," Harry said, pushing himself up again. The world spun a bit less the second time, but he must have still looked bad, because Draco's arm wound around him, pulling one of Harry's over his shoulder.

"Don't be stupid," Draco muttered. "Just—just let me help you." When Harry opened his mouth to argue, he whipped out his wand with his free hand, pointing it in Harry's face. "Don't make me levitate you like a child, *Potter*."

Harry glared, wanting to shout a number of angry, threatening things, but he realized even through his annoyance that that would be dumb. His head was starting to pound—an aching pain that must have been dulled by adrenaline before.

Besides, his concern for Hermione was far greater than his hatred for Draco Malfoy and whatever was left of his pride. Begrudgingly, he allowed Draco to help guide him, far preferring an arm around his torso to being levitated like someone who'd just been knocked out on the Quidditch pitch.

Narcissa, holding onto Hermione, led them away from the foyer. Lucius remained behind, his magic as paralyzed with shock as his body seemingly was. Harry might have found that funny under other circumstances.

Fortunately, the guest rooms in the west wing of the massive building which was Malfoy Manor were much closer than the room Harry had been staying in. Narcissa and Draco brought their two injured charges to a bedroom which was not far at all, only down the hall. It was decorated very differently than Harry's room. This one was monochrome and simple in design, very modern—there were no posts surrounding the bed, nor furniture that bordered on garish, though it was all still quite nice. The west wing must have been a more recent addition to this manor.

Narcissa deposited Hermione on the bed, who sunk into the mattress and looked alarmingly pale. "One moment, I'm going to go get the ointment…"

Without pause, she swept from the room, leaving Harry and Hermione alone with her son. Harry pushed Draco away and sat next to Hermione, ignoring him. "Hermione, I—why—"

She shook her head. "Don't," she whispered, barely audible. She clutched her left arm to her chest, and two, fat tears rolled down her cheeks. "Please."

Harry shut his mouth and said nothing else. Draco kept fidgeting, staring at the ceiling and clutching at his own arm, perhaps subconsciously. His magic was even twitchier than he was, edgy with discomfort. It was making Harry increasingly unnerved, more so than he already was.

Thankfully, Narcissa soon returned with a vial full of clear liquid and a cloth. "Here, hold out your arm…"

Hermione obeyed. The Mark was disturbingly black, fresh and emanating a sinister, dark magic. Narcissa wet the cloth and placed it over the brand.

The reaction was instant: Hermione's eyes rolled back and she sighed, slumping against Harry's side like she'd just sunk into a warm bath. Harry held her up, capable of doing so while he was sitting, at least. Narcissa pulled out her wand and conjured up a bandage which wrapped around Hermione's arm, keeping the salve in place and concealing the cursed mark from sight.

"Now you," Narcissa said when she was done, pointing her wand at Harry and setting the empty vial aside. "Stay still, Harry."

Harry did. Narcissa cast a wordless spell over him, and he felt a kind of tingling sensation sweep up and down his spine—he assumed it was the same charm she had used on Ron before.

"Just some swelling, nothing terrible," she announced after a moment. "I can fix it, now… Just close your eyes for me and don't move, all right? Draco, hold… hold the girl."

The hesitant pause was not missed on Harry—the conflicting moment in which Narcissa did not know what to call the young woman she once referred to as Mudblood, who had just been marked by her Lord as one of his own.

Just like her son.

"Her name is Hermione," Harry said coolly, feeling that if she could be on a first name basis with him, she could deign Hermione with the same curtesy.

To his surprise, Narcissa nodded. "Of course," she said. "…Hermione. Draco, hold Hermione up, please, so that I may heal Harry."

Draco's jaw fell open in shock, his aura trembling with what Harry thought might be the magical equivalent of a seizure, but he recovered quickly. He sat on Hermione's other side and held her steady, grimacing but obeying.

Hermione, for her part, looked like she couldn't give a damn less—her eyes were closed and she was holding her arm, clearly basking in the fact that she was no longer suffering from the injury of a cursed blade and a fresh brand.

"Okay. Close your eyes."

Harry did as he was told. Another spell hit him, a much cooler one. It was like a winter breeze fluttering around his head, only it was very

strange, because the sensation of the cold wind was occurring *inside* his skull. Effective, though. The throbbing pain that had been increasing with every second diminished at once, and the dull ringing in his ears vanished. When Harry opened his eyes, his vision was clear, and he felt nearly normal.

Physically, at least.

"Thank you," he said. Narcissa flashed him a smile before turning her attention to Hermione, concerned.

"You're pregnant," she said bluntly.

Hermione's eyes fluttered open at what was not a question, but a statement. "Yes," she whispered. It only struck Harry then that Hermione was probably unable to speak any louder than that; her voice must have been raw from screaming.

"How far along are you?"

"S-six weeks."

"*What?"*

The exclamation left Harry's mouth before he could stop it. Hermione recoiled away from him at the shout, which, unfortunately for Draco, meant she was closer to him. He looked as scandalized as Harry, and Narcissa shot both boys a warning look.

Harry cleared his throat and looked away.

"You are going to be fine, Hermione," Narcissa said pacifyingly, grabbing her hand and smiling with a reassurance that Harry was sure she didn't truly feel. "You made the right choice, coming here. We are going to take care of you. You and your baby are going to be fine."

Hermione blinked owlishly, more tears simmering in her eyes at Narcissa's kind words. Her bottom lip trembled, speechless.

"Just do what I say, and everything will be all right. No one has to get hurt, not anymore… Can you do that? Will you listen to me, will you let me take care of you?"

Hermione nodded. She listened, taking the nutrition elixir Narcissa gave her without so much as a grimace. She let Narcissa examine her in the same way she had Harry, only Narcissa made Hermione lay flat

on her back on the bed, first. Harry stood and moved out of the way. When the spell lingered on Hermione's stomach, flashing white, Narcissa assured her that this was normal and that she was perfectly fine.

"This is a Dreamless Draught," Narcissa said when she was done, offering her a cup. "You need to rest."

Hermione didn't accept it. "I can't," she whispered.

"One time, at this stage, won't hurt anything," Narcissa said knowingly. "Not recovering from high stress will be far more detrimental."

Hermione stared at the cup, clearly torn, but still didn't take it. Narcissa sighed and set it on the bedside table.

"All right… I'll leave it here, in case you change your mind. Either way, we should leave you to rest."

Draco made for the door at once; Harry almost laughed at how quickly he bolted.

Narcissa made no comment on her son's cowardice. "I take it you'd like a moment with her as well?" she said, looking between him and Hermione.

Harry waited for Hermione to nod before speaking. "Yes," he said. "Please."

Narcissa nodded as well, pocketing her wand. "I'll be in the foyer, Harry," she said. Then, pausing in the doorway and looking over her shoulder, she added, "Please don't do anything reckless?"

Harry smiled despite himself. "Me? Reckless? Never."

Narcissa did not return his grin, but Harry could tell by the way her magic brightened that she was amused. "I'll be in the foyer," she repeated with finality.

Narcissa closed the door behind her when she left. Harry and Hermione were alone.

"Hermione," Harry said once she was gone, sitting at her side again. He knew it was not the kindest thing, asking her right away when she so clearly needed rest, but he couldn't help himself. "Why on *earth* did

you come here? *Why?"*

Hermione buried her face in her hands, a pained sob escaping her throat. Harry's heart broke all over again, and he pulled her to his chest in another gentle embrace. "Not that I'm not happy to see you," he said in an ill-attempt at a joke.

Unsurprisingly, Hermione didn't laugh. "Oh, Harry," she said, her voice still hardly above a whisper. She pulled away from him and grabbed his shoulders, examining his face with bloodshot eyes. "I th-thought you were d-dead… We th-thought you w-went to him in the f-forest…"

"Yeah, well… I did." Hermione hiccupped, but Harry didn't pause long enough to let her get emotional. "I did, but he didn't kill me, and I'm fine. Er, alive."

Unlike Ron, she did not ask why this would be the case. Harry decided to not to let the conversation go that route if he could help it—at least, not right now. "But why would you come here? He could have killed you, Hermione, w-would have…"

Harry's voice trailed off as he shuddered, the reality of how close Hermione may have just come to being murdered in front of him, once more in Malfoy Manor, truly sinking in.

"I wasn't going to."

Hermione whispered it like she was admitting a vile, atrocious sin. Her eyes looked vacant as she stared at the wall. "I wasn't going to… I decided last night that I couldn't. He had Ron, he had you. I had to keep fighting, I was the only one left… All night I said I wouldn't come. Morning came, and I told myself, *no, I can't.*"

She looked at Harry, her eyes once more wet with tears. "I cracked just before nine. Five minutes left, and I fell apart completely. I…"

Hermione twisted her fingers together in her lap, her magic spiraling anxiously. "But why?" Harry asked again. "What made you change your mind at the last minute like that, why—?"

"Because I'm selfish," she interrupted, and Harry would have never thought such a fragile voice could sound so bitter. "Because I knew that to fight would be to die, eventually. I could form a resistance, but I would undoubtedly wind up dead, probably soon. And… and I knew the only chance of living at all—even if it was an infinitesimal one—

would be to do what he said. The only chance for us to live…"

She stopped talking, eyes glassy as she looked at the floor, deep in thought. Her magic began undulating in a mesmeric way, like liquid velvet. Harry tried not to be distracted by it.

"And I couldn't leave you, Harry," she said after a long moment, seemingly coming back to herself. "Not after I thought you were dead. I'd never run if it meant both you and Ron being hurt… You know that, don't you?"

Harry was shocked. He knew that Hermione was loyal, but he never would have thought that her friendship with Ron and him outweighed her conscience, her need to fight for what she believed in.

She must have seen his disbelief on his face, because her magic withered with guilt, and she let out a shrill sob. "D-does that make me a terrible person?" she asked, tears clinging to her lashes. "Does that make me horrible, valuing the life of my few friendships more than countless, faceless others? For caring more about my present than everyone else's future?" She paused, swallowing thickly, her hands falling to her stomach. "For someone who doesn't even exist yet?"

Harry grabbed her hands and held them. "No," he said. Her face looked so pale, the bags under her eyes so dark they may as well have been bruises. "It doesn't make you terrible. It makes you human."

"Is that a *good* thing?"

To that, Harry had no answer.

Hermione squeezed his hands, and her head fell on his shoulder. Harry felt so heavy with guilt it was unbearable. He remembered how badly he had wanted to rest right after the Triwizard Tournament, how he had wanted nothing more than to sleep dreamlessly under the influence of a draught… and how Dumbledore had made him relive it all anyway, right then, right there.

Now here he was, doing the same to Hermione. As much as he wanted to ask her a hundred more questions, he knew it wasn't fair or right. "You should take this," Harry said, grabbing the cup. "You heard Narcissa, she said it wouldn't hurt anything…"

She sniffed loudly. Harry had never seen such a defeated-looking Hermione Granger before. "B-but what about Ron, what's going to happen with him, and with—"

"He'll be fine, I promise," Harry said. "I'll talk to Narcissa, to… to the Dark Lord. He listens to me, sometimes. Life is crazy. I'll explain everything later, but right now, the best thing you can do is rest."

She stared at him for a long, long moment. Her magic whirled in a steady rhythm, making Harry think of something prowling, like a tiger stalking back and forth. Analyzing, thinking.

"Okay," she said at length. Then, to Harry's astonishment, she took the cup and drank with no further argument.

She handed it back to him once she drained it, and Harry stood so that she could lay down. "You'll stay?" she asked, her aura flickering with anxiety. "Until I fall asleep… You'll stay?"

Harry smiled and grabbed a chair, pulling it up so that he was sitting at the side of the bed. "Of course."

Hermione's magic calmed, and she laid down, holding on to Harry's hand as she did.

It was almost laughable, watching how quickly the draught worked. Harry knew the feeling—Narcissa Malfoy certainly knew how to brew.

"I'm so glad you're okay, Harry," she whispered, her eyelids falling shut even as she spoke.

"That you're alive… that you're…"

Her sentence went unfinished.

Hermione was asleep, her magic confirmed it. It moved slowly around her in a peaceful manner, like dark, ruby waves. Harry smirked and grabbed a blanket from the foot of the bed, tucking her in. As tempted as he was to stay, he thought it best to let her sleep.

It wasn't until he had his hand on the door handle that Harry realized it. Hermione… She had just been staring at him, blatantly, extensively…

And she had not commented on his eyes.

She had not so much as reacted to them, in fact. Harry had forgotten to even think of explaining them, and it never occurred to him to do so once he was alone with her, because she never said anything. He turned and looked at her over his shoulder, his mind racing. She

looked so innocent and peaceful, lying there.

Harry shook his head. *Later.* He would talk to her later, when she was somewhat recovered.

With that internal promise, Harry quietly left, closing the door behind him and heading towards the foyer. He would speak to Narcissa and plead with her to get Ron out of the dungeons. Harry's stomach churned at the thought of Ron being held in the same cell *he* had been. Was Bellatrix still down there with him, tormenting him, *torturing* him?

Harry increased his gait, almost running with the sudden need to go to Narcissa, rushing to the foyer—but he never made it there. He never even made it down the hall, as short of a distance as it was.

He only had a split-second warning.

The familiar feel of Voldemort's dark and glistening magic came from behind him… and it was radiating a fierce and toxic *want.* Harry couldn't possibly turn quickly enough. Voldemort suddenly had him by the throat, effectively preventing whatever sound he might have made.

The Dark Lord didn't say anything. He only held his human horcrux by his neck from behind, the softest tendrils of that intoxicating light fluttering across Harry's skin before he was pulled into a side-along apparition.

Such Vanity

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In that unfathomable split-second of disapparation, Harry feared that they would go somewhere horrible. He was therefore surprised when they reappeared in the same room he had been staying in… still in Malfoy Manor, just on the opposite side of the home.

Harry thought to shout about a dozen different, venomous things—but the grip on his throat tightened, trapping the very breath in his throat mid-inhale. Voldemort leaned into his neck, hissing the threat:

"For the sake of your friends, their families, and every single thing you hold dear in this world—*hold your tongue."*

Harry nodded as best he could in his grasp, and Voldemort smirked. His magic glistened enigmatically… *Pleased,* Harry realized without much effort. The Dark Lord was very *pleased.*

But that toxic *want* hadn't waned one bit.

"Good boy," Voldemort murmured, loosening his hold.

Harry wasn't granted a moment to feel indignant. That indescribable warmth began washing over him, buoyant bliss that radiated from Voldemort's touch and traveled to the depths of his soul.

His whole soul, his *pure* soul. Harry could sense Voldemort's desire for it—powerful but… contained. It was not the nauseating *need* that had made him feel like he might be torn apart, as he'd experienced before, but it was disorienting nonetheless.

Voldemort pulled him closer. For a moment Harry thought he was going to kiss him again, but he didn't. The Dark Lord simply touched his forehead to Harry's, just like he had when he'd *gifted* him with his memories.

Harry struggled to not lose himself in the sensation of weightlessness, to remain level-headed, though it was *very* tempting to do so… and it was *exactly* what Voldemort was doing.

The Dark Lord sighed, his eyes fluttering shut as he released Harry's

throat and began to run his fingers gently along his scalp—an action which, admittedly, felt pleasant. Voldemort was just drinking in the beautiful light that was Harry's soul, basking in the feeling of being whole…

Like an addict, Harry thought. He'd considered that this might be the case before, but now he could tell with absolute certainty. With the way Voldemort's magic was moving—glittering and brimming with such a powerful *relief* now that he was touching his human horcrux again—there was no question that the Dark Lord was addicted to Harry's soul.

And wasn't that the most horrifying concept in the world?

Harry pulled away slightly, and Voldemort's fingers twitched in response, tightening in his hair and keeping him close. "Do *not*," he hissed, his eyes still closed, his breath ghosting across Harry's face.

It was such a vague yet perilous command. Harry never would have thought he could hate two, simple words so fiercely.

Still, he listened. Harry closed his eyes and resigned himself. Voldemort started running both his hands through Harry's mess of hair again, practically *petting* him.

They stayed like that for a long time: Harry, motionless and trying not to get lost in that seductive connection which hummed like a live wire between them; and Voldemort, doing precisely that as he carded his fingers through his locks… rather shamelessly, Harry thought.

He *was* bewildering, wasn't he? Voldemort was so unstable that Harry was in a constant state of emotional whiplash. One moment, he was focused solely on imposing as much fear into everyone in the room, not even glancing at Harry, and then, just minutes after the most unsettling departure, returning just to grab him by the neck in—

In the hallway, Harry realized, barely keeping his mind from slipping into that warmth, that tempting loss of thought. *He came to get me in the hallway, when I was alone, because… It was all a show. The fear-inducing exit, the way in which he terrified them all before leaving as though they meant less than nothing to him… It was all an act. He must have been waiting for the second when I was by myself so that he could whisk me away and they wouldn't see… because he didn't want them to know, doesn't want them to find out about…* this.

Voldemort's pull lessened, and his glittering aura began to surge back

and forth, undulating like a placated, gilded serpent. The blissful light receded to a more bearable level, and it was easier to think clearly.

Physically, Voldemort had not moved at all. He kept his forehead to Harry's and his hands remained in his hair, lightly stroking his scalp.

"The trial for Fred and George Weasley will be held in two days' time," he said, and though he spoke softly, the unexpected sound of his voice after such a long stretch of silence made Harry's heart skip a beat. "If they are acquiescent, they shall face minimal charges. They no doubt will be, knowing that I hold their brother." He paused, lowering one of his hands and trailing his fingers down Harry's face, down his neck, stopping only to rest his palm on his collarbone. Harry's eyes flew open, but Voldemort's remained closed as he continued speaking.

"Hermione Granger will not be harmed—in fact, she shall be well cared for. Tomorrow morning, she will be accompanied by Lucius and Narcissa to the Ministry, where she shall officially register as a muggle-born witch. She shall go through all the necessary protocol under the new regime of the Ministry of Magic. Afterwards, if all goes according to plan—and it will—she shall, in the Ministry's eyes, be a free witch."

Harry was stunned. His mind raced as he tried to comprehend what was happening. The Dark Lord was… briefing him? *Actually* informing him of what was going on without first insisting that he beg, or… or torture him in some other, unethical manner?

"Of course, she shall be staying here as well. As troublesome as I know the you three have been in the past, I have no such concerns this time… as I so undeniably and unquestionably *own* all of you."

He lifted his head and opened his eyes, the smallest smirk brimming with superiority gracing his lips. Harry's shock at being informed vanished, replaced by malice. "You don't *own* anyone," he snapped.

It didn't matter. Harry's words only amused the Dark Lord, whose magic writhed around him like silent laughter, black and glinting gold. "Even with impeccable eyesight, you are blind, Harry," he murmured, and there it was, again—that emotion resembling *fondness* emanating from his magic.

Harry hated it.

He shoved the Dark Lord away from him, feeling triumphant when the action caught Voldemort off guard, making him step back. "How *could*

you?" Harry snarled, and the pleasant warmth disappeared. "How could you brand her with the *Dark Mark*, *Hermione*, how *could* you, how—"

"I have given her an honor far above her station," Voldemort interrupted. "I have granted her a place among my own which many wizards and witches would kill for—some who have done precisely that. Hermione Granger shall serve to act as the poster-child which every muggle-born shall strive to be for generations to come, so long as she does not do something incredibly foolish… She is being given the gift of life, a protected and envious life, and you have the thoughtless nerve to question this decision?"

His magic darkened, rising behind him in a wall of blackness. "Perhaps it is my own fault, that I continue to be shocked at the foolish audacity that is Harry Potter," he seethed, advancing. "Allow me to extend the vast and endless sea which is my patience when it comes to you and your snap-judgements, Harry. By marking Hermione Granger and making her one of my own followers, I am protecting her life. Not even Bellatrix would dare to lay a hand on her now, knowing that she is branded. She will be safe. Her future child will be safe."

Harry clenched his hands into fists at his sides. Voldemort was doing what he always did, backing him into a wall, making him feel powerless. Harry stood his ground, refusing to allow him to do that to him yet again.

"Everything you do is so—so fucking underhanded and confusing!" he spluttered, unable to stop himself. "Why be so horrible as to make her reopen that wound Bellatrix gave her—with the same blade? You *wanted* her to come, didn't you? So why not just give her a normal damn portkey that didn't make her hurt herself? Not to mention is was a bloody fucking riddle—what if she'd wanted to come, but just couldn't figure it out? And then—and then the *timing* thing! Was it really necessary to make us wait an hour, wondering if she was going to show up? Why not just tell her 'be there at eight' and be done with it? Why the window? Why? Just… *why?"*

Harry was panting by the time he was done, having not paused to take breath once. Voldemort's expression and magic remained neutral the entire time.

"…Because," the Dark Lord began after a moment, crimson eyes flickering briefly to Harry's heaving chest before settling once more on his face, "I wanted to learn, Harry."

"*What?*"

Voldemort took another step closer, drawing near enough that their foreheads were almost touching again, but Harry didn't step back in response. "One can learn a great deal about other people, but one must give them choices in order to do so," he said, like this was all perfectly obvious. "I discovered a great deal about Hermione Granger, by the manner in which she arrived, by how she appeared at the very last moment, standing tall despite her bleeding wound… a very different statement than if she had showed up right at eight, on her knees and begging for mercy. And if she would have not showed up at all, whether from defiance or inability to do so, well… Then I would not have wanted her at all."

His lips twitched, his aura saturated with egotism. Harry may not have believed such vanity possible, if he couldn't feel it for himself in Voldemort's magic.

"And just what do you really expect Hermione to *do*, now?" he asked, deciding not to acknowledge the Dark Lord's admittedly admirable cunning; he seemed to be doing a fine job of secretly acknowledging it himself. "Do you honestly think she'll serve you as a *Death Eater*? She will *never* do that. It doesn't matter that you have Ron and me, or that she's pregnant; Hermione is a muggle-born herself! She came to surrender, not *join* you! People's rights matter to her! Even if you make some kind of exception for her, she'll never willingly *help* you!"

Voldemort's head tilted to one side, looking honestly confused—a rare expression on the Dark Lord's face. His magic, too, seemed perplexed.

Then he laughed.

A few beats of suspended silence, and then the Dark Lord was laughing, his magic dancing and glistening around him. It wasn't a mirthless sound. It wasn't cold, high, or cruel. It was a genuine laugh; the likes of which Harry had never heard from Voldemort before.

Harry… wasn't sure how to feel about that.

Before he could make up his mind, Voldemort fell silent, though his delighted expression remained. His lips were curled in a smile that reached his scarlet eyes, that made his whole, deceptively beautiful face light up.

He almost looked human.

Harry was still processing that thought when Voldemort had his hands under his chin, pressing his lips to his forehead in a chaste gesture. Warmth bloomed at his touch, the softest tendrils of light like a caress. "Oh, Harry," Voldemort murmured against his scar, cradling his face. Harry was too befuddled to react. "You are so pure that it is nearly unforgiveable."

Harry's blood boiled in an instant. The Dark Lord was smiling so superciliously, his magic radiating such arrogance that it made Harry want to scream. It reminded him of the moment after Ron's trial when Voldemort had just sentenced him to six months of *Umbridge*, but had just decided to keep that information from Harry at the time.

"You're purposefully not telling me something extremely pertinent."

Harry made the accusation in as controlled a voice as he could manage. Voldemort only laughed quietly in response.

Harry snapped. "*Wow*," he said loudly. He crossed his arms and looked away from the Dark Lord.

"And I thought *Dumbledore* was bad."

The tendrils of warmth disappeared.

Harry only got to relish Voldemort's pure, undiluted shock and revulsion at being compared to Albus Dumbledore for a second. His vision blurred, his feet left the ground, and the next thing Harry knew, the world was shattering apart around him in the form of sharp fragments and splintered wood.

The vanity—the actual vanity. Voldemort had grabbed him by the collar and shoved him with an inhuman strength into the mirror over the vanity, causing the glass to shatter and the wooden surface of the dressing table itself to break.

"If you ever compare me to *Dumbledore* again, you will find out precisely how different we are," Voldemort snarled, his magic convulsing with rage.

Harry didn't feel what he knew should have been pain. Even Voldemort had a few cuts on his face from the glass; surely he, Harry, had far more on his backside, seeing as it was *his* body which had been thrown into the mirror.

But Harry felt nothing but *spite*. "Maybe you shouldn't act like him,

then," he said coldly.

He braced himself, ready for the torturing curse that was assuredly headed his way, for the pain—but then Voldemort's magic whirled in a different manner, and Harry didn't understand it at all.

"And what would *Dumbledore* do with you, Harry?" Voldemort murmured, pressing him more firmly against the broken mirror. The glass dug into his back through his robes, and suddenly Harry was *very* aware of every little bit of silver, like hundreds of teeth on his shoulders and spine. "You would be worthless to him now. He would want nothing more than your *death;* struck by the killing curse which he expected *me* to cast… But he was wrong, and now he is dead, and I own every, single part of you. I control you, Harry Potter—mind, body, *and* soul…"

"Wrong," Harry gasped. Rather than try and shove him off, which he knew would be useless, Harry stayed still and jutted his chin forward, speaking evenly. "You're wrong. You've tried twice, now. You can't control me. You don't have any power over me, not like that—not over my mind, not over my body, and *definitely* not over my *soul.*"

He expected to be thrown into another piece of furniture, or perhaps onto the floor. He was shocked when the vicious expression on Voldemort's face melted away, replaced by a thin smile.

Would he ever be able to anticipate the reactions of Lord Voldemort?

"Don't I?"

Voldemort leaned in closer, releasing his hold on Harry's robes so that he could trace his lower lip with his thumb. The Dark Lord's magic started to swell with a different kind of want, one which Harry had seen before.

Oh, God.

"I can make you feel bliss, if I want."

Voldemort all but purred the words, making warmth bloom in Harry's heart like a sunrise, and for a moment everything else vanished, eclipsed by beautiful, thoughtless light.

"I can make you hurt, if I want."

Immediately, the light vanished, and a white-hot pain cut across

Harry's forehead, burning in his bones. Voldemort held him against the shattered mirror when his body jerked. Harry had just opened his mouth to scream when it was gone, a fleeting moment of agony.

"I can make you fall into a pit of oblivion, I can render you unconscious with a touch… or did you think that was normal magic? The way I have been able to merely tell you to sleep, and your body so *eagerly* obeys?"

That statement struck Harry with an abrupt and colossal wave of terror.

He had never considered this. He had always assumed that Voldemort was just that powerful, that he could make anyone pass out without a wand or an uttered incantation. Judging by how twisted Voldemort's smile was, savoring Harry's pale face, this was not the case.

It was just Harry.

"What else, I wonder…"

Voldemort's words were a whisper, his magic lustrous.

"…can I *make you do?*"

Voldemort leaned over the vanity and pressed his lips to Harry's neck, making that unfathomable light blossom there. The wood creaked in protest as Voldemort pushed against it, and the broken mirror rained down fragments of silver—sharp stars spilling over Harry's shoulders.

He barely noticed.

The room could have been on fire, and Harry wouldn't have been any the wiser. His blood ignited under Voldemort's touch, at his tongue against his neck, and the all-encompassing, radiant light—

And it *was* radiant, it was exquisite, it was everything—it was his, all his, and he wanted to drown in it, this light; he wanted to sink below its surface and breathe it in, liquid gold in his blackened lungs, he *wanted—*

Harry gasped like someone coming up for air, having briefly experienced Voldemort's thoughts. The Dark Lord's magic was ravenous; Voldemort's body moved with expert control, ravishing Harry's neck with his mouth but otherwise barely touching him.

Yes, said a voice, and it was Voldemort's, but Voldemort couldn't be speaking, because his lips were on his throat, and oh, *oh*—

Harry's whole body was burning. Some part of him knew this couldn't be a good thing, but it *felt* like such a good thing, oh, it felt *so good*—

Look at you.

Heat like a volcanic eruption was pouring down his spine, pooling in places it shouldn't and making Harry's back arch into the mirror. Glass pierced his shoulder blades through his clothes.

This is wrong, Harry thought, his pulse quickening.

Voldemort's lips found his ear, and he ran his tongue along the shell of it before speaking. "Unlike you, Harry, I am not blind," he murmured, pausing to bite his earlobe, making Harry's breath hitch. "I know you and all of your flaws… I know your every weakness… *Look at you.*"

Voldemort trailed one hand down Harry's chest, and heat followed his fingertips. "Do you see how you bend to me?" His mouth was still to Harry's ear, every word making his heart beat harder. "How badly you *crave* my touch…"

Harry opened his mouth to retaliate, to deny it—*I don't want this, I don't*—but just as he was about to voice his protest, Voldemort bit his neck, turning his words into a gasp before he could give them life.

Tell me, came the same command, Voldemort's smug voice in his mind. *Tell me how much you don't want this.*

Harry threw his head back, hitting the broken mirror but feeling nothing but the sharpness of the Dark Lord's teeth on his throat. He tried again to say something, but just as he was about to speak, Voldemort sucked on the sensitive skin on his neck, making what was meant to be a plea turn into another sharp intake of breath.

Tell me, Harry. Tell me.

Such suffocating arrogance with every unspoken syllable. It was like a game to him, demanding that Harry say no, only to so skillfully ruin his every attempt with his lips and his tongue, to make every intended refusal come out as a gasp or a muffled, wordless cry.

Tell me how much you don't want this.

Voldemort's hand went lower, lower… Harry put his palms against the Dark Lord's shoulders, meaning to push him away, to end this before —

Voldemort's hand was between his legs. Harry's fingers clenched at the fabric of Voldemort's robes instead, an involuntary reaction.

"Look at how your body betrays you," Voldemort breathed into his ear as his fingers curled around the hem of his pants.

It was true. Harry's body was betraying him; his hips canted, seeking the Dark Lord's touch.

With his other hand, the Dark Lord grabbed Harry's jaw, forcing him to look into his eyes.

"Tell me you hate this, Harry," he commanded at the same time that he forced his pants down, just far enough so that Harry's cock was exposed. He was irrevocably hard, he was *desperate.*

Despite what he was doing, Voldemort's eyes never left Harry's, and his other hand never released his chin. His magic was going wild with lust, but Voldemort's face was so carefully controlled, looking smug. "Tell me just how much…" he said, his mouth far too close to Harry's own. Harry bit his lower lip, knowing words were beyond him, and any sound which might come out would be a sin.

"…you hate the touch…"

His fingers ghosted over Harry's length, his eyes smoldering with challenge.

"…of a *fucking monster*."

One slow caress, and there was no help for it—Harry moaned, the sound choking out of his throat like it was escaping. The buoyant light that had been coiling up his spine bloomed there, too—such a pleasurable sensation that Harry knew he was lost. He closed his eyes, unable to meet Voldemort's intense stare any longer under such a wave of pleasure and, somewhere on the periphery of his mind, *shame*.

"You see, Harry?" Voldemort whispered, touching him so teasingly and slow that Harry thought it could qualify as torture. "How weak you are… You are a slave to your desires, to your traitorous body…"

Harry kept his eyes closed, clenching the fabric of Voldemort's robes far too tightly. Voldemort was relentless, never fully wrapping his fingers around his length, only touching him enough to make him whimper and moan and—

Not beg, Harry told himself firmly, refusing to not, at least, lower himself to that. *I won't beg.*

"It's *fascinating,*" Voldemort said, laughing softly.

"It's *pathetic*."

And yet, even through all the gorgeous light and heat and veil of shame, Harry had a poignant thought.

Hypocrite.

Lord Voldemort was the most horrendous hypocrite to ever live. Here he was, telling Harry that he was weak for the way his body reacted—because of *his* forced ministrations—but the truth was that, despite his expert control over his body… Voldemort was *far* more aroused than Harry was.

The proof of it was in that fleeting transgression into his mind; it was in his magic, which Harry could sense so clearly—he was so ravenous with lust that Harry wondered how he was maintaining his façade of cold, haughty detachment at all.

Harry realized two things, then.

There was nothing more dangerous than the Dark Lord when he wanted to prove a point for the sake of his pride… and that this front could not possibly last forever.

Harry failed to stifle another whimper when Voldemort's nails dug into his jaw. "Look at me," he hissed.

He knew he shouldn't.

Harry did it, anyway.

Maybe it was just the overabundance of buoyant light; perhaps it was only because the bond between them was thrumming with such an intensity, and this was one more way in which Voldemort had some control over his human horcrux… but Harry found himself unable to disobey Voldemort's command.

His eyes were dark with lust, but Voldemort only smirked, like he merely found all of this so *amusing* and *pathetic*.

His fingers finally wrapped around Harry's aching erection.

"Come for your *master*."

Harry did.

Only one satisfying stroke, and Harry broke. His muscles quivered, his hips bucked. His cock throbbed, and oh—*fuck, yes—yes—*

The pleasure was mind-numbing and glorious; he had never known anything like it. Harry choked out a broken moan as his cock pulsed, coming hard in the hold of the Dark Lord's tightly curled fingers.

Harry was sure his skull would have rammed back into the broken mirror, had Voldemort not had such a tight hold on his chin—but he did. Voldemort had Harry's face in one hand and his cock in the other, where he stroked him once more as he continued to throb and spill himself in violent spurts. He held Harry's gaze the entire time, that dark magic glistening with triumph as the Boy Who Lived came undone in his grasp, lost in uncontainable, blinding ecstasy.

Harry's body went limp after his orgasm finally ended, though he was panting heavily. Voldemort didn't loosen his hold on him afterwards, only continued to stare into his eyes.

"…Do you know what I think, Harry?"

Harry tried and failed to catch his breath, to say something, *anything*… but he couldn't. He had no words.

Voldemort smiled.

The intoxicating light dissipated, and Harry felt a cold wave of dread wash over him in its absence. Reality returned in the form of sharp fragments and splintered wood, of stinging pain and blood on his back.

"I think it is time… that the elusive Undesirable number one is found."

Chapter End Notes

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Clarity

Nothing, it would seem, satisfied Lord Voldemort more than rendering his human horcrux incapable of speech.

Harry's jaw hung open uselessly. He wanted to ask what *exactly* that meant—and he was certain that Voldemort could see the question burning in his eyes, even without Legilimency—but was unable to form words.

Voldemort's magic, which was still swollen with a lust that he was clearly in denial over, glistened with a flash of that familiar and unsettling fondness. He still had his hand on Harry's jaw, seemingly content to keep ahold of it indefinitely, though he did finally release his grasp on his cock. Harry was glad that he couldn't look down, trapped in Voldemort's grip as he was. He didn't think he could handle seeing the evidence of what had just transpired.

Harry swallowed thickly, and Voldemort's eyes left his own to glance at his throat when he did. He stared at Harry's neck, his aura suffocating, saturated with conflicting emotions.

Harry held his breath. He felt like if he made any sudden, unexpected movements… *something* would happen. Something—

Terrible, horrible, sinful, wrong, wrong, wrong—

"You are bleeding."

The smile slid from Voldemort's face. He let go of Harry's chin to reach behind him, wrapping his fingers around the base of his neck. When he lifted his hand again, his fingertips were covered in blood. The mirror fragments were still digging into Harry's back even now, so he was hardly surprised that the back of his neck, the part of him which was most exposed to the broken mirror, had been cut so badly.

Voldemort stared at the blood on his fingers with an unreadable expression on his face. "My intentions are to spill *less* magical blood, Harry," he murmured, eyes flashing up to Harry's again. "Least of all *yours*, precious as you are… And yet you have always been so skilled in that aspect, haven't you? Ruining my carefully laid plans, forcing me to act in ways I never intended…"

"Precious," Harry choked out mockingly, finally finding his voice

again.

Voldemort grabbed Harry's shirt by the collar and pulled him forward so that their faces were far too close. "You *are* precious," he seethed, so adamant and yet *angry* about this fact. "You are the *bearer of my soul*, unintentional as it was, unwelcome as it is. There is nothing I value more than your wretched life."

Harry wasn't sure if he should find his words terrifying or hilarious. Voldemort's face and magic both twisted in conflict.

He *despised* Harry.

But he also… *didn't.*

Before Harry could react, the light was back, that warmth radiating between them and making the pain from the glass fragments all but disappear. Voldemort pulled him to his feet, away from the vanity.

Harry tried to struggle—for a moment. The second he attempted to push away, Voldemort's grip tightened, and his magic flashed in annoyance. *"Don't,"* he hissed. Harry reluctantly obeyed, hating how *good* it felt to be near him when he was calling forth that light. It made it so difficult to *focus*, to ground himself.

It wasn't fair.

"So stubborn, Harry…"

Voldemort pulled his wand out from within his robes. The tip of the Elder Wand was pressed against Harry's back, and a ripple of magic washed over him, a cool, tingling sensation that swept down his spine. Voldemort was wordlessly healing his wounds. He also vanished the blood and… other bodily fluids that were on the front of Harry's robes, smirking slightly as he did.

Once he seemed content with his handiwork, Voldemort pointed his wand at the vanity. Bits of glass and splinters of wood hovered in midair before reconstructing themselves, like many pieces of a complex puzzle. In seconds, the vanity was whole again. Harry caught his reflection in the mirror, and was jarred at the sight. He, Harry Potter, red-eyed and pale, being held in Lord Voldemort's arms.

He closed his eyes and tried not to shudder.

"You will eat tomorrow."

The command surprised him; Harry looked up at the same moment that Voldemort scooped him off the ground and began carrying him away from the vanity… towards the bed.

Maybe a thrill of terror would have coursed through him, had that blissful light not increased ten-fold. "You will remain here, and you will behave yourself. I shall be preoccupied. Nothing could possibly be worse for you or your friends than you rebelling in a way that would distract me from my business… Remember that, Harry."

They were definitely *threats* that he was making as he carried Harry like a child to the bed, but he spoke them in such a soothing tone that Lord Voldemort may as well have been singing a lullaby. Harry felt suddenly groggy, his head heavy.

"But for now, you need rest."

He gently laid Harry down on the bed and sat down next to him. Harry realized what was happening, then. He was going to make him fall asleep against his will, he was going to leave him here—but he couldn't do that, he *couldn't*, not with Ron still locked up in a cell with Bellatrix—

Harry opened his mouth to voice this concern just as Voldemort leaned down and brushed his lips over Harry's scar, grazing his forehead. The light was so strong and pleasant that all of Harry's racing thoughts were obliterated. He sighed, powerless to stop himself.

"Tell me," Voldemort crooned, his voice sweet like liquid honey. "Tell me you will behave tomorrow."

Harry's eyes slowly opened. They felt so heavy already. He grappled for resilience—what was it he had been so determined to say just a moment before?—but found it impossible. Light and warmth was thrumming between them, and it would be so much easier to just sink into it…

Then he looked up, past Voldemort's face, and clarity flickered back to life.

"Why is that there?"

Of all the questions to ask.

Voldemort followed Harry's accusatory gaze to see that he was

referring to the mirror on the canopy of the bed. The image of the Dark Lord sitting at Harry Potter's side stared back at them, and Harry hadn't realized it before… But he couldn't see Voldemort's magic in the reflection, nor could he see his own…

"…The mirror?" Voldemort turned his attention back to Harry, looking bemused. The light lessened slightly, and Harry clung to lucidity.

"Yeah. Why would you put a giant mirror above your bed?"

Voldemort looked far *more* amused at that. "*My* bed?" he said, smirking. "You think this is *my* bed—*my* room?"

Harry stared. He'd never really considered it before, but he had sort of assumed that this was Voldemort's room that he'd been dumped in. Now that he took the time to think about it, that did sound a bit… stupid.

"It's not?"

Voldemort laughed, looking at him in that same manner he had earlier, like he thought Harry was the most adorably ignorant being alive. "No. Malfoy Manor is just one of many places I use as a base of sorts... And besides, I do not require a bedroom." He paused for a moment, his expression clearing.

"I do not sleep."

Harry was sure he had said that in a way that was meant to be impressive—that Harry should find it imposing that the Dark Lord didn't need to sleep like weaker, *lesser* men—but his magic said something else. It lost any of its previous vigor, settling like a dark and heavy sheet around him.

Voldemort *said* that he did not need to sleep… but Harry was able to divine the reality was that he *couldn't* sleep, even if he wanted to. It was obvious by his magic that this was an unwelcome truth.

Voldemort misinterpreted Harry's thunderstruck expression. He smiled again, and the warmth between them grew. "No, I do not require such excessive rest… but you do."

He leaned down and touched his lips to Harry's forehead once more. The room began to darken. "Wait," Harry said, unable to recall in that moment why he had wanted to stay awake, but remembering that he did. "Wait, don't—"

His words were cut short when Voldemort pulled back, his mouth hovering just over Harry's. Harry's breath hitched. Was Voldemort going to…?

But the anticipated kiss never came. "Rest," Voldemort breathed, the warmth of his breath ghosting over Harry's lips.

Slumber pulled him under.

Harry hit the ground running.

The earth beneath his feet was cold and damp, and his feet were bare. The wind blew, the sound a continuous note of shrill foreboding. Static filled the air. The world was a monochromatic blur, consisting of only tints of gray.

"…*Harry Potter…"*

He was in the maze.

It was the labyrinth of thick hedges and magical obstacles, the Third Task. Harry was racing along those same pathways, only this foliage was colorless, the sky a steely veil.

"…*Harry Potter…"*

He ran.

Heart thundering, Harry sprinted. A left, a right, another left. There was something following him, something *chasing* him—that serpentine entity of his nightmares, it was *coming for him—*

Harry made another turn, and found himself in a clearing. This, in the past, was where the giant spider had attacked him, had attacked he and Cedric…

But there was no fierce beast, here. No trophy, no end in sight, no portkey to whisk him away to the death of his friend and the rebirth of a monster. But there was something. Where the gleaming, golden trophy had once awaited a champion atop a raised platform, there now stood the Mirror of Erised.

Harry warily approached.

The moment he stepped onto the platform, the wind stopped, and all was eerily still. He left footprints on the stone when he moved

towards it; evidence in residual water that Harry Potter was here, had walked here, swas standing *here*.

He looked into the mirror. Harry was wearing the same, ragged robes he had been dressed in when he'd gone into the forest to die—that same, fringed fabric and stained cloth. He wondered why he was barefoot.

The reflection, for a long moment, remained unchanged. Harry waited for his parents to appear, to see his family… He choked on his breath, suddenly, an emotion he was unprepared for swelling there with the guilt-ridden words forming in his mind…

Mom, dad… I failed you, I'm sorry….

They did not appear.

It was *Voldemort.*

But not in his newly acquired, handsome body. This was the Dark Lord in his freshly resurrected, serpentine form, the truth of what he was. Pale skin, a flattened nose—and *those eyes,* those same, searing eyes that were the precise hue of fresh blood, only these had slitted puplis, like a cat's. Voldemort's irises alone had color in this nightmare.

Harry turned instinctively, thinking the Dark Lord must be standing behind him. He wasn't. The monster existed only in the mirror. Harry watched the horror unfold in the silver.

His reflection was acting of its own accord, no longer mimicking him. Voldemort stood behind his likeness, and when the Dark Lord reached one long, unnaturally white hand to card his fingers through his hair, the false-Harry melted into his touch, eyes fluttering closed in obvious bliss. Voldemort pulled the mirror-Harry closer to him, whispering something which Harry could not hear into his reflection's ear, wrapping his arms around his waist, gloating, smirking—

And the entire time, those scarlet eyes never left his.

No, Harry thought as he witnessed Lord Voldemort, the murderer of his parents bite his ear, kiss his neck, lower his hands down his chest…

No.

Across his stomach and over his hips…

"…*Harry Potter…*"

No, no! This is not my heart's greatest desire. This is not, this is not, this is not!

…Then why was he staring, watching, enthralled like someone in a trance?

Voldemort's eyes were gleaming. Harry's reflection was panting, and when his eyes opened again, they, too, were no longer colorless, but a startling red, pupils dilated with lust—

"*No!*"

Harry awoke with his heart in his throat and someone's robes in his hands. The world snapped into focus, far too bright.

"Fuck, *Potter*!"

Harry released his death grip and sat up straight, shoving blankets off himself. His pulse was racing, the sudden return to reality far too jarring for his liking.

"…*Draco?*"

It was, indeed, Draco Malfoy. He was scrambling away from Harry's bedside like Harry had just tried to hex him, glaring once he was at a safe distance. His magic was a bright blur of light, a chaotic shroud around him.

Harry's attention was diverted rather quickly, however, by the sound of laughter.

None other than Ron Weasley was standing at the foot of his bed. "I told you not to do that!" he shouted at Malfoy, grinning broadly. Ron's magic, in great contrast, was bright, fuzzy, and animated. "I told him not to do that," he repeated, looking to Harry and laughing again.

"Not to do what?"

"To wake you up. I told him you have a history of getting tangled in sheets, shouting things, and all other manners of waking up dramatically, but he didn't listen. I think he nearly pissed himself when you grabbed him."

"I did not!" Malfoy spat. "And I wasn't *trying* to wake him up, I just wanted to make sure he was still *breathing*."

"I'm still breathing," Harry mumbled. His mind was reeling as his eyes continued to adjust. His focus flickered from Malfoy, who was huffily straightening his robes, to Ron, to the corner of the room, where…

The vanity was perfectly intact.

Right, because Voldemort had fixed it… right after—

"Are you all right, mate?"

Harry's attention snapped back to Ron. *Ron,* whom Harry had last seen being dragged off to a cell by Bellatrix. *Ron,* here, with Draco Malfoy. "You're out of the cell," he gasped. Harry jumped off the bed, all thoughts of Voldemort and their… disquieting interactions forced aside. "What did she do to you? Are *you* all right? How long was I asleep? Where is Hermione, what—"

He'd gotten to his feet too quickly. Blood rushed to Harry's head, and Ron moved to steady him in the same moment that Draco retreated further towards the door. "Whoa," Ron said. "Easy, there. I know you're excited to see me, but trust me, passing out while on your feet is not a pleasant experience. I would know."

Harry couldn't help but smirk—he knew that Ron fainting before was *not* funny, but… well, it had been rather funny.

"And I'm fine, thanks for asking," Ron went on, his tone extraordinarily light and conversational. "They didn't torture me or anything, just left me in the cell overnight… They let me out earlier today. And you've been out for… I dunno, twelve hours? Longer? It's almost two in the afternoon, in any case."

"What?" Harry gaped. *How* had he been asleep for so long?

"Yes, it's late, and *I* came here to make sure you hadn't died in your sleep or something," Malfoy said moodily. His magic had settled a bit, now swarming around him like a halo that could not have looked more out of place on *Draco Malfoy*. "That's the last thing I need to happen to me, when I'm left in charge." He crossed his arms, sneering.

His typical, pompous attitude caught Harry off guard. Surely, he would not be speaking so nonchalantly—if also condescendingly—about Harry *dying* if he had known that *precisely* that had nearly

happened a few days ago.

Voldemort hadn't told him, then, Harry concluded. The Dark Lord had sensed on some level that his human horcrux was dying, and had come straight to him, not bothering to inform and be angry with Draco Malfoy either before or after the fact.

Something about this struck a chord with Harry, but he didn't have time to try and decipher what it meant now. "*You're* left in charge?" he asked instead, matching Draco's patronizing tone. "*Why?"*

"Because everyone else is at the Ministry," Ron answered first. "With… with Hermione. *His* parents took Hermione to the Ministry of Magic this morning so that she could *register*. They've been gone all day."

He couldn't have injected more venom into his words if he'd tried. "What about Bellatrix?" Harry asked. "She went too? And… you-know-who?"

It was amazing, really, how just mentioning Voldemort sucked all the air out of the room. Ron's face paled slightly, and Draco's eyes fell to the floor—learned, submissive behavior when his master was being discussed, Harry was sure. "Dunno where those two are, I'm just glad they're not here," Ron said.

"And they left this morning, you said," Harry responded, and Ron nodded. "To to register Hermione…"

"Yeah. It's quite an ordeal, I guess."

"How long will she be gone? Is she on trial?" Harry recalled all too clearly what it had been like when they had witnessed of the Muggle-born Registration Commission in action, when they'd infiltrated the Ministry to steal the locket.

"Dunno. I suppose so. We were only told that, so long as she does everything she's supposed to do, she'll be released today… Apparently, they're in the process of improving their system for registering muggle-borns, as more research is being conducted within the Department of Mysteries to study and fully understand *sporadic* magic. You know how they were so intent on making it seem as though anyone who couldn't prove they had magical ancestry must have stolen their magic?"

Harry nodded, his blood boiling just as it had when he'd first heard this. "Well, now they're saying this may not be the case, after all—that

it may be a different kind of magic for some, and needs to be studied further. It's just a lure, though. An incentive to persuade the muggle-borns who are still on the run to turn themselves in, with the false hope that they might be accepted within the magical community under you-know-who's regime."

Malfoy shifted uncomfortably, obviously unwilling to participate in this conversation. "Come on," he said, motioning for Harry and Ron to follow him. "I'm supposed to make sure you're *cared for*, Potter, to be a proper host to our *lovely* new guests. Which means feeding you."

He walked away without another word, into the hall. Harry and Ron exchanged a quick look and they both shrugged, unsure what else to do but follow him.

Malfoy glanced over his shoulder to make sure they were coming, then fell into his usual, arrogant stride. There was something oddly comforting about Draco Malfoy regaining his pretentiousness—like some things would never change, no matter what the circumstances were.

"Malfoy Manor was built over five hundred years ago," he said as they walked. His pace was, at least, much slower than his mother's had been. Draco seemed in no hurry to show off his impressive home. "It was built by the finest magical architects of the 15th century, which my father says were the most skilled in their craft—that was before restrictions on permanent expansion charms were made, and there was very little in the way of legal constraints to prevent them from building the *best* interiors."

Harry had no idea what that meant, but obviously Ron did. He tore his attention away from a particularly garish light fixture to look at Malfoy in surprise. "But that's dangerous, that," he said. Then, for Harry's sake, he explained, saying, "Too many expansive charms. They can conflict with each other, cause the air to feel unnaturally heavy and the like."

"Not if they're done properly," Draco retorted. "As all the ones within *our* manor were, of course. But they're very difficult, and the problem was that too many idiots went about doing them the wrong way, getting people killed when living rooms would suddenly implode because the charm was faulty. Laws were put in place, after that. A few incompetent fools ruining it for future generations. Shame. I'm sure many overly large, magical families could use the extra space."

He cast Ron a condemnatory look. Ron's hands curled into fists, but Harry grabbed his wrist, shooting him a warning glance. Draco Malfoy had a wand; they did not.

Draco smirked. They kept walking. "There's more magic within these walls than any other residential wizarding establishment," he continued. They turned a corner, and Ron stared just as dumbfoundedly as Harry had when they came across the huge bay window. White peacocks strutted across the lawn, and lush gardens were visible in the distance.

"Merlin," Ron gasped. "Why on earth do you have albino peacocks, Malfoy?"

Malfoy shrugged. "Why not?"

"This is ridiculous." Ron shook his head as they kept moving. "How many of you live here, again? Three?"

"That *used* to be the case," Draco said scathingly. "We seem to be acquiring more and more occupants all the time, though."

Harry thought about that. How long had Bellatrix been staying here? And what about her husband—was Rodolphus also staying in Malfoy Manor? And now there was he, Harry, Ron… and Hermione; Harry knew that Hermione would not be allowed to leave, either…

They passed many doors and hallways, and Harry recognized where they were headed. He could see the stairway up ahead, which led down to the main foyer with the grand chandelier. It was the last room he would have chosen—the place where they had just waited for hours for Hermione to appear. "Why are we headed to the foyer?" he asked, surprised.

Draco cocked an eyebrow at him. "It's the only room with a fireplace that's currently connected to the Floo Network. I assumed you would want to be there, to know the moment Granger's back?"

"Oh. Yeah, I do," Harry said. Then, smiling slightly, "Wow. That's oddly thoughtful of you, Malfoy."

Draco scowled, but otherwise did not respond.

"God, look at the wallpaper," Ron murmured, completely distracted from that bit of conversation by all the garish decorations surrounding them. "It looks like something my great Aunt Muriel would like."

He shared a knowing look with Harry, his fiery aura dancing in amusement. Draco wasn't fooled. It was clear by Ron's tone that this was *not* a compliment. "It's *sophisticated*, not that I would expect you to appreciate something like *style*," Draco sneered.

"It's *repulsive*."

"*You're* repulsive."

"Stop it," Harry said, quickly intervening before Ron could snarl another insult. "Just—stop it. The last thing *any* of us needs is to end up at each other's throats."

It felt strange to be the voice of reason; Harry was used to being the one who needed to be reminded to keep his mouth shut.

Even stranger was how it seemed to work. Perhaps it was only his red irises that were the cause, but Draco's glower lessened, his magic calmed, and he couldn't hold eye contact with Harry for more than a second. "Don't insult my home then, Weasley."

"You've insulted mine plenty of times," Ron responded coolly.

"We've all been right pricks to each other for years," Harry said. He looked to Ron, keeping his face impressively straight as he spoke. "He's insulted *our* families, we've insulted *his*… He was turned into a ferret and bounced around the hall once; Hermione punched him in the face and he almost cried; he lost the Snitch to me in every Quidditch match ever—"

"At least I've never spit up slugs for hours on end!" Draco interrupted heatedly, his face having turned red at the word 'ferret' and grown brighter with every word. He glared at Harry, his expression vicious and his aura sparking like colorless firecrackers. "At least *I* never got caught trying to spy on someone, getting myself petrified and my nose smashed under the heel of someone's boot."

A frigid silence fell between them. Draco hadn't yet retracted his wand, but Harry could see his fingers twitching, hovering over the pocket where he obviously kept it.

"…We have all been terrible to each other," Harry said at great length, forcing himself to remain calm. "But none of that matters anymore, we —"

"You would be *dead*, if it weren't for him."

Ron had drawn himself to his full height, and his aura was a wall of vivid orange, bright and solid. Draco's red face paled when Ron towered over him, looking more ruthless than Harry had ever seen him before. "I didn't want to go back for you, I said we should leave you in the Room of Requirement and let you burn—but we didn't. Harry wanted to save you, for some godforsaken reason. You tried to kill us, and he *saved* you. You should be *dead*."

Draco cringed at the last word. He said nothing, only stood there, not backing away from Ron's glare, but not fighting back, either.

Harry's mind raced as he tried to figure out how to diffuse the situation. "The way I see it," he said slowly, carefully, "we should *all* be dead. But we're not. We're here, now, and we're in this together, whether we like it or not… Actually, I'm kind of amazed that they left the three of us here alone. Whose bright idea was that?"

Draco's lips twitched like he was suppressing a smile. "We're not completely alone, truthfully," he muttered. He turned and began descending the stairs.

"What… what does *that* mean?" Ron shouted, looking panicked now as they followed him into the foyer. "Who else is here?"

Draco waited until they were at the bottom of the stairs before he yelled, in a clear voice, "Binny!"

A soft *pop*, and a house-elf appeared. A male, it looked to be, and somewhat young. He bowed reverently when he arrived, wearing what seemed to be a burlap sack.

"Yes, young Master Malfoy?"

"Bring us something to eat. Bring us—I dunno, what do you want?"

He glanced at Harry and Ron, waiting for a response. Harry had no idea what he wanted, if anything—he felt mildly nauseous nearly all the time. But then he remembered what Voldemort had commanded yesterday.

"I don't care," Harry said.

"Anything," Ron added, whose stomach growled just then as though in confirmation.

Malfoy shot him a disgusted look at the sound. "Helpful. Fine, bring us

a spread, Binny. Impress me. Make it quick. And bring us tea first."

The elf nodded and disappeared.

Draco then went and sat at a table in the corner near the fireplace, the same one which he and his family had sat at while waiting for Hermione. Strange that they would be doing the same thing now, though the situation had changed drastically.

"Well?" Draco said, when Harry and Ron simply stood there. "Do you plan to eat standing up, then? Or is the prospect of joining me at a table *that* daunting?"

Harry had to give him some credit; Draco had regained his haughty attitude yet again with an impressive swiftness. "Extremely daunting," Harry said as he sat. "I can't think of a single thing I've ever done that's more nerve-wracking than this."

Ron chuckled and sat at Harry's side, across from Draco.

"You think you're funny, don't you?" Malfoy drawled.

"*I* think you're funny, Harry," said Ron. "Not as funny as I am, but you do all right."

"Thanks, mate."

Draco rolled his eyes.

Another *pop* announced the return of Binny, who carried a tray with three porcelain tea cups and a lightly steaming kettle. It was the same, beautiful china that Harry had seen before—white and decorated with gold designs. "Thanks," Harry said when the elf poured him a cup and offered it to him. Binny did the same for Ron and Malfoy before disappearing again, presumably to go prepare food.

Ron was ogling at the gilded cup. Malfoy watched him carefully, like he was waiting for him to insult their dishware, too. When he didn't, he took a sip of tea. "So," he said, his eyes gleaming over the rim of the porcelain in a devious way that Harry was sure could mean nothing good.

"Which one of you knocked Granger up?"

Ron, who had just taken a sip of tea, began choking. His body turned red in record time, instantly reaching his ears and probably

everywhere else, too. Harry felt his own face burning out of sympathy.

"Weasley, then?" Draco said casually. "Hm. I would have put my money on you, Potter. Not that I think either of you are great options, mind, but I would have thought Granger to prefer you over him."

Ron slammed his teacup down so hard it nearly shattered. Harry flinched; there was no way that Draco could have known just how expertly he had stabbed at Ron's insecurities. It was not so long ago that Harry had witnessed his own likeness in a fog emanating from a locket, snogging a very cruel and unrealistically beautiful version of Hermione…

"Oh, did I touch a nerve?" Draco said when Ron only glared, incensed beyond words. "My *sincerest* apologies."

He looked anything but apologetic.

"Malfoy, do us all a favor, and shut the hell up," Harry said.

"What? I was just asking. I thought I ought to know who the father was of the Dark Lord's newest recruit's future child."

"Wh… what?" Ron said, his eyes widening and magic becoming frazzled. "What did you just say?"

It took Harry a moment to realize why Ron looked so shocked. He had not been present in the hall when Hermione had been branded, he hadn't witnessed it…

"He doesn't know?" Harry said, looking to Draco. "No one has told him —*you* haven't told him, yet?"

"Slipped my mind." Draco took another sip of tea, clearly *loving* this drama.

"Told me what? Harry, what is he talking about?"

Harry swallowed hard. He didn't know how to go about breaking this news to Ron, so he decided to be blunt. "He… The Dark Lord branded Hermione with the Dark Mark," he said quietly. "He's made her a Death Eater against her will. It happened right after you were taken down into the cells."

Harry could see the pain unfold in his eyes. Ron didn't say anything, only stared, silently horrified. His magic was like a dead weight

around him, losing all its vibrant saturation.

Pop!

"Oh, good," Draco said cheerfully. "Lunch."

Binny had followed his master's orders exceptionally well. Three trays full of food and silverware hovered in the air before landing in the center of the table—fruit, bread, cheese, crackers, and more. Draco helped himself to a bagel at once, looking completely unbothered by Ron's turmoil as he spread jam over it. The elf bowed and disappeared again without a word.

Ron stared at the food like he was looking straight through it. "He made her a Death Eater…?" he said hollowly. "But… but *why*?"

"I think… I think he plans to use her," Harry murmured. Neither he nor Ron reached for any food. Harry was sure that Ron's appetite, just like his, had vanished.

"Of course he does," Draco said. "If he didn't have a *use* for her—or anyone, for that matter—then she would be *dead*." He took a bite of his bagel.

There was a long stretch of silence where Ron continued to stare vacantly at his teacup, and Harry fidgeted in his seat, unsure of what to say or do.

After a few minutes of this, Draco finally spoke. "Well, starving yourselves isn't going to make anything better for anyone," he drawled. "You both look like you haven't eaten in days. Do you think not eating is going to improve your circumstances—*her* circumstances? Have you no sense of self-preservation *at all?*"

Harry glowered at his callousness. Ron blinked owlishly, like he was coming back to himself.

"But that means… Hermione will *never* be able to escape him," he whispered. "She will *never* get away."

Ron was looking at Harry when he said it, but it was Draco who responded. He set his bagel down and his face became rigid. Even his magic took on a fierce demeanor—an impenetrable, silvery sheet. "No one can *ever* escape the Dark Lord," he said, looking back and forth between the two of them. "No one. We are all just pawns to him, pieces to be moved around to bring him more power, more control.

Disposable and meaningless, despite what he tells us to our faces. The sooner you accept this, the better off you are. *You* lost. *He* won. So, you can sit there and mope about how hard life is and waste away, or you can man up and eat some *fucking* crackers."

Draco leaned back in his chair and grabbed his bagel again. He took another bite, glaring at them both while he did it like it was a challenge.

Harry didn't miss that Draco had said *he* won rather than *we*.

Ron reached forward. He moved slowly, his face blank as he grabbed a single cracker. "I don't like you, much," he said, and then popped it in his mouth.

Draco snorted.

It was a most ineloquent response to Ron's theatrics. Draco tried desperately to conceal it, to look down and pretend like that horrid sound had not escaped his lips, but it had. His magic fluttered in an amused but embarrassed way.

Harry could hold it in for about half a second before he started laughing.

Once he did, there was no stopping it. Ron and Malfoy began laughing, too, and it was extremely surreal, to be sitting at a table breaking bread with Malfoy and just… *laughing*.

Maybe they were *all* a bit delirious.

Whatever the reason for the abrupt and unexpected end in hostility—as temporary as it surely was—the three were all able to relax for a time afterwards. Ron devoured two bagels and a dozen crackers with cheese. Even Harry could eat more than he had in weeks, and he didn't feel sick afterwards.

When they had eaten all they could, Draco snapped his fingers and Binny appeared. "Clean this up," he said, and the elf obeyed. Once he and the dishes had all disappeared, Draco cleared his throat, his tone taking on a business-like tone.

"Good. Now that you've both managed to eat something, I can show you this."

Draco stood and went over to the fireplace. For a moment Harry

thought he was going to gather up some floo powder, but then he reached for something which was resting on an end table next to it.

It was a newspaper. "It's your favorite thing in the world, Potter," Draco said, and though Harry was sure he meant to speak in his usual drawl, the sneer fell flat. His magic dulled. "A front page article all about *you*."

He handed the newspaper over. Harry slowly unfurled that morning's issue of *The Daily Prophet*, Ron leaning over his shoulder so that he could see as well.

Harry's heart stopped when he read the title.

'*UNDESIRABLE NUMBER ONE, HARRY POTTER: FOUND.*'

And the sub-headline underneath:

'*The Infamous Boy Who Lived, notorious criminal, rebel, and suspected murderer, has finally been captured. Olivia Flint reports.*'

"What?" Ron gasped, his magic twitching sporadically. *"What?"*

Draco smiled humorlessly. "You can read it all, of course, but it's a really lengthy article for how little information it has. Basically, it says that Potter here was caught yesterday when he unwittingly sought refuge in his godfather's old home, which was being monitored by the Ministry."

"And that you're being held in a high security cell in Azkaban *while you await trial!"* Ron shouted as he read, looking up at Harry. *"In two days!"*

"Yes, well, I suppose it would sound bad to say, 'the notorious criminal is staying in a cushy mansion with the Malfoy family'," Draco said.

But Harry's eyes were stuck on the word trial. "Trial," he said blankly. "I'm being put on trial… for rebellion against the Ministry of Magic and for the *suspected involvement in Albus Dumbledore's murder?"*

The newspaper fell from his hands. He could think of about a dozen different things that he could be accused of and put on trial for, but the suspected murder of *Dumbledore*?

"That was their reasoning for putting a warrant out for your arrest before, remember?" Ron said darkly. "I guess they couldn't just do

away with that accusation now… Have to keep the lie going, and all that…"

And so *many* lies, Harry thought as his eyes tore across the page. Harry wondered just how far the Dark Lord was going to make this all seem believable to the general public. Had he used some poor Muggle-born and forced them to take Polyjuice potion or something? Had he made someone play the part of notorious Harry Potter, just to have them arrested and tossed in Azkaban, so it looked like this was what was truly happening?

"It says my trial is happening the day after your brothers'," Harry murmured, and then read, *"'Potter's trial is to be held on Friday, May 22nd, before the entirety of the Wizengamot—the day after the also much anticipated trial for conspirators and rebels Fred and George Weasley.'"*

"Oh, hell," Ron said. "What is he going to do to you all?"

"He's not going to kill Fred and George," Harry said quickly. "And he's not going to sentence them to Azkaban for life either. He told me."

Ron let out a breath of relief.

"I imagine he'll give your brothers a similar sentence to the one he gave you," Draco said. "So long as they're smart enough to admit they've lost and swear allegiance to the new regime."

"They might not be," Ron muttered. "And even if they do… the same sentence, you think? Fuck." He ran his hands through his hair, looking utterly miserable. "Umbridge is going to collect Weasley's like chocolate frog cards."

Harry grabbed the paper again and turned his attention back to the article. A large portion of it was rather redundant; a longwinded and reverent report of how important the new regime was for the safety of the magical community, and how rebellious acts would not be permitted to continue…

"What kind of sentence is he going to give *you?"*

Ron was staring at Harry. Harry said nothing, as he honestly had no idea. What *would* Lord Voldemort, current ruler of the Wizarding World and Head of the Wizengamot, sentence Harry Potter to?

"Something similar, probably," Draco answered instead. "He obviously has plans for using you, and you wouldn't do him much good being

locked in Azkaban, would you? Hell, he doesn't even want you there *now*, for some reason. Probably worried you'd pull some crazy stunt and escape."

But Harry knew that wasn't the real reasoning at all… not that he was about to bring *that* topic up. "This is madness," he said instead. "All of this—these trials, these compounding lies. It's *madness*."

Draco leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table.

"You're failing to fully grasp the situation, Potter. This madness? *This is it.* This is the beginning of an entirely new world. Wizarding society is changed *forever,* and for whatever unfathomable reason, the Dark Lord has decided to keep you around… all three of you. He wouldn't do that if he weren't planning on either locking you in a cell and using you for his own personal enjoyment, or controlling you and parading you out in the public eye for his political agenda. Seeing as neither of you are in cells any longer, Weasley here is already considered a free man, and you're on the docket… congratulations. That means you've made it to the upper crust."

He smiled crookedly. "Welcome to pureblood, wizarding society," he said in thick tones of sarcasm. "Where every decision is made for you before you ever realized you had a choice. Where a slightly outdated article of clothing could mean your social downfall, where a single hair out of place could spell your demise…"

His gray eyes lingered first on Ron and then on Harry, who were both so clearly guilty of these transgressions.

"It's a life of no choice, no freedom, none whatsoever. It's a *cage*." Draco paused and threw his arms out on either side of him, gesturing towards the marble floors, the crystal chandelier, the beauty that was his glorious, enviable manor.

"…But it is gilded, and it is *fabulous*," he finished dramatically.

His distress was thinly veiled, purposefully so. Harry shared a look with Ron, and he could tell they were both thinking along the same lines—perhaps Draco's life as the sole heir to the Malfoy family was not all it was cracked up to be.

"If you don't manage to screw things up for yourself at your trial, of course," Draco added after a moment, addressing Harry. "Though it's possible you'll be given a script, who knows. The Dark Lord likes things to go a very specific way. Try not to let your brash, Gryffindor

nature ruin everything for the rest of us when you're in front of a crowd."

The full weight of the situation as Harry envisioned precisely this filled him with dread.

In two days' time, he was going to be taken to the Ministry.

In two days' time, he was going to be out in the public eye, and everyone was going to see him, and—

"What about my eyes?" he said suddenly. "He can't—what did you say? —parade me around for his political agenda with my eyes looking like this, everyone will think that I'm not really me, or something…" But then Harry grinned, a feeling like triumph blossoming in his heart. "He'll have to change them back. He'll *have* to."

His moment of confidence was destroyed nearly as soon as it had been born. "Oh. You might want to flip to the fourth page, where the article is continued. Right at the end."

Frowning, Harry followed Draco's instructions and ripped the paper open. He found the end of the article, and he read aloud the last two paragraphs.

'*…Our Lord's wisdom and mercy is a source of inspiration for us all. He has gone to great lengths to show compassion to even his longest standing opposition. As stated earlier, when Harry Potter was finally captured to be brought to justice, he did not surrender peacefully. He fought against Ministry officials, and was affected by several curses as a result of the struggle—one of which was a particularly dark spell that should have rendered him permanently blind. However, the Dark Lord, in all his infinite knowledge on magic, was able to grant Potter his sight back—though there were some distinct side effects which altered the color of his eyes.*

It is a parable we should all keep in mind. Even the most ignorant and rebellious of wizarding kind can find forgiveness in the Dark Lord's new order, and by the light of his vast wisdom, we can all see with true clarity.'

Harry set the paper down. Ron was staring at the floor and Draco was looking up at the ceiling—both of them quite ostentatiously *not* looking at Harry.

Harry thought to tear the paper to shreds. He considered screaming and flipping the table over, or maybe even magically breaking something, if he worked himself up enough. He wondered if he could

unhinge the chandelier without a wand—he wanted to watch the light fixture fall again, just to hear the crashing of the metal frame and shattering of the glass.

He didn't do any of those things.

Harry folded the paper up neatly and laughed, a soft and harmless sound. Draco and Ron both looked concerned.

"He's good," Harry said, his voice absurdly calm. "He is *really* good."

Tragically Ironic

The flames erupted, vibrantly green.

Harry, Ron, and Draco all got to their feet as the fireplace ignited. Narcissa and Lucius appeared first—Harry perceived flashes of corresponding navy and gray when they entered—and then, following directly behind them—

"Hermione."

She looked pale and thin, but physically far better than she had yesterday. Hermione's magic hung heavy around her, a deeply saturated burgundy that flowed in lethargic waves. Her eyes landed first on Harry's, then went to Ron's.

No one spoke. Harry and Ron both stood there, staring, and Hermione too seemed unable to move. It was the first time the three of them were together again. The first time since…

Harry almost couldn't recall when. The three had not been united since the battle of Hogwarts, after they had witnessed Snape's murder and he had taken his memories to Dumbledore's office…

Harry hadn't said goodbye, before going to meet what he had anticipated to be his death.

And Ron, the last time Hermione had looked at *Ron* had been right before she disappeared in a fiery wall of phoenix flames, attempting to destroy both him *and* the Dark Lord in a cursed explosion in her retreat…

Ron's magic was vibrating with emotion, though which one, Harry couldn't tell. Draco's light aura was twitching almost just as much, his eyes darting about the three of them as he waited to see what would happen.

Hermione swallowed audibly, and spoke in a small, timid voice.

"…H-hi."

A wordless, unanimous decision was made. Harry and Ron both rushed towards her at the same time, and in a single motion trapped her in an embrace from both sides.

If any of the Malfoys reacted to this, Harry had no idea. For a blessed moment, his mind was flooded with a singular emotion, something so pure and simple he had forgotten how it felt.

Joy.

Hermione and Ron were here, they were alive and in his arms and *safe*…

And so long as he had them, Harry felt he could do anything.

The heartwarming moment of reunion was soon shattered. Lucius Malfoy cleared his throat, loudly, and they all turned to look—though none of them released their hold on one another.

"As… *touching* as this is, your presence is required. The Dark Lord wants you at the Ministry. I was instructed to bring you to him. Now."

Harry exchanged an anxious glance with Hermione and Ron, but nodded and stepped away before they could say anything. Lucius smirked and shook his head.

"Not you, Potter. You're supposed to be in Azkaban, remember? I meant *you*."

His eyes flickered to Ron. Ron, who still had his arms around Hermione's waist, blinked in surprise. He even turned and looked over his shoulder, like Lucius Malfoy might be talking to some other ex-vigilante who had been hiding behind a chair. "Me?" he asked, his voice going up an octave. "H-he needs *me?* Why?"

"I suspect you shall find out when we get there." Lucius beckoned towards Ron with one hand, impatient. "Now, Weasley. Believe me when I say you do *not* want to keep the Dark Lord waiting."

Ron looked ill. Hermione grabbed his face, stood on her tiptoes, and placed a swift kiss to his cheek. "It will be fine," she said. "Everything will be fine."

Ron stared at her as though he was in a daze. Harry was certain that if she had not given him a stern look afterwards and pushed him in Lucius's direction that he would have been content to just stare at her forever.

Finally, Ron nodded. "Well. All right, then," he said in a most painful, forced attempt at casualty. He caught Harry's eye one last time before

following Lucius towards the fireplace. Harry could tell he regretted the action at once—he winced afterwards, and Harry knew it was because of his new, crimson eyes that he was about to go see on a far more terrifying face.

Lucius gathered up a handful of powder and tossed it into the fireplace. "The Ministry of Magic," he said clearly. When the flames burst in plumes of green, he motioned for Ron to go first—like he didn't trust him to use the Floo network correctly himself. Ron grimaced and stepped into the fire, disappearing in a flash of emerald. Lucius followed him immediately afterwards.

Narcissa turned her attention to Harry and Hermione once they'd gone. "Are you feeling all right, Harry?" she asked, her soothing, blue magic deepening with concern. "I trust my son has been a courteous host?"

"Er, yeah," Harry answered. "*Very* courteous."

Narcissa beamed, and Draco scoffed. "Right, and now I'm done," he said. He looking at his mother expectantly. "Can I go to Zabini's, now? He's been inviting me over for ages, says Parkinson's been driving him completely mental without me around."

"All right, but be back before dinner." Narcissa raised her arms as though to hug him, but Draco stepped away, eyes flashing towards Harry with a distraught look on his face. He glared at Narcissa, and it was easy to tell what he was thinking. *Don't embarrass me in front of Potter, Mother.*

Narcissa's arms fell to her side, looking crestfallen. Draco ignored her and went to the fireplace, tossing some powder in the flames and shouting, *Zabini Manor!* He stepped into the flames and disappeared without so much as a backwards glance towards any of them.

Narcissa's magic withered, so saddened. Harry felt abhorrently upset by this. Realizing that telling her that her son was a sodding idiot would probably *not* make her feel better, Harry instead smiled sheepishly and said, "*I'll* hug you."

She let out a short laugh. "You're sweet," she said. She laughed again when Harry followed through—captivity was making him oddly affectionate, it would seem. She was still smiling when he pulled away, and Harry would be lying if he said that didn't make him feel like he accomplished something.

"Hermione, are you hungry?" she said, turning to her. "Shall I have our house-elf make you something?"

Hermione shook her head. Harry noticed then how glazed her eyes were, and though he had sensed her magic being lethargic before, realized just how sluggish it was.

What had they done to her at the Ministry?

"All right, then. I'll show you to your room, again, in case you've forgotten. You're on strict bedrest."

Narcissa motioned for Hermione to follow her.

"Can I—?"

"Of course, dear." Narcissa answered Harry's question as to whether or not he was allowed to go with before he could ask it. Harry's heart welled with sadness, though—there was something about the way she said dear that reminded him painfully of Mrs. Weasley.

She led them to the same room Hermione had slept in before. "Your other friend will be staying in that room there," she explained to them, pointing towards a door further down the hall. "There are some clothes in the wardrobe, Hermione; there should be plenty there to choose from until you get your things in a few days. If something doesn't fit just let me know, and I'll have it adjusted for you."

Hermione nodded feebly. "All right. I'll let you sleep… Don't keep her up long, Harry. She needs rest."

Hermione *did* need rest; she was blinking slowly at the door as Narcissa closed it in a manner that had Harry very concerned. "Hermione, are you all right?" he asked the moment they were alone.

"Yes… Just tired, is all… It was a very taxing day…"

She sat on the edge of the bed, and Harry joined her. "What did they make you do?"

"I had to give a blood sample for genetic testing, to see if I have any familial ties to any witches or wizards that I am unaware of… which I don't, of course. They declared that my magic was inexplicably sporadic but seemingly stable, in the end. The paperwork has been submitted to the Muggle-born Registration Committee… the official request for my ability to use a wand."

Harry's brows rose at that. *A wand.* Lord Voldemort was actually allowing Hermione Granger the use of her wand?

Before he could dwell on this, Hermione went on. "Then they had me answer some questions in front of the entire Committee, rather like a hearing, though I wasn't being accused of anything… in front of Umbridge and all of them. They asked me about my background and upbringing—all under the influence of veritaserum—and… and they made me vow that I would never contact my muggle relatives again…"

"What?" Fury burned in Harry's chest. His jaw dropped, appalled by this—and yet, in nearly the very same thought, was not surprised by this news in the least. "They won't let you talk to your family again? *Ever?"*

Hermione's eyes went further out of focus, her gaze drifting over Harry's head towards the ceiling. "Hermione?" Harry said after a moment. She blinked and came back to herself, and then she pursed her lips, frowning.

"Sorry," she murmured. "My head feels a biz fuzzy. I don't think I should have taken that Dreamless Draught last night…"

"What else did they have you do?"

"That was it," she said. "I'll supposedly hear from them in a few days' time if my request for a wand has been approved."

Harry didn't believe it. He felt the way her magic was whirling as though it were stuck in slow motion, and figured that there must be more to this story.

…But then again, as he thought about it, maybe that *was* the whole truth. Was it so farfetched to think that Hermione would be in a bit of a daze after all that she had been through? Besides, it wasn't like he knew what being pregnant felt like. He decided not to prod her further on her trip to the Ministry. "What… what does the Dark Lord need Ron for?" he asked instead, a new brand of anxiety pooling in his stomach at the thought.

Hermione looked up, shaking her head slowly. "I don't have any idea."

"You don't?" Harry balked. She had *seemed* like she knew, before Lucius took Ron with him.

"No, I really don't. Maybe they want him to meet with Umbridge and the rest of the committee? Before he begins his community service or whatever it is they're calling it…"

"Maybe," Harry conceded.

There was a stretch of silence in which Harry contemplated asking her a question that continued to bother him. He wondered why it was she had not commented on his disquieting eyes, before…

But then she was laughing, and Harry was so surprised at the sound that his thoughts were derailed. "What?" he asked, more alarmed by this behavior than anything.

She pulled the sleeve up on her left arm, revealing a very crisp, black Dark Mark. "Do you remember," she said, and Harry thought she sounded a bit slap-happy, "when we were younger, and I made some tactless comment about how you and Ron could run away and join the Death Eaters if you wanted, but I couldn't because I was a Muggle-born?"

Harry felt himself smiling despite how morbid this was, despite everything. "I do," he murmured. "I believe I said something along the lines of, 'yeah, if they just quit trying to do me in, we'd get along just great.'"

"Funny, that."

There was a beat of silence, and then they were both laughing. Life was such tragic irony.

The rest of the evening passed painfully slow.

Narcissa showed Harry to their family library after he left Hermione to get some much needed rest—evidently, she was on bedrest until Narcissa deemed her well enough not to be. Harry mentioned that it was a good thing that she had not told Hermione that they had such a massive personal collection of books, or her bedrest would have been happening in their library, instead.

It was not as impressive as Hogwarts' library, of course—at least, not in terms of number of books. What the Malfoy Manor library lacked in texts, however, it more than made up for in decadence. The grandiose staircase, decorative wallpaper, and plush carpets made Harry feel like he was in some mansion from the Victorian ages.

He passed the time there, and though he attempted to read some book about contemporary wizarding politics—he figured he should become well versed on such things, considering—Harry had a tough time focusing. His thoughts kept straying, wondering what Ron was being forced to do at the Ministry, when he would be back, and…

Voldemort.

Harry tried desperately *not* to think about what had transpired between the two last night, but found it very difficult not to now that he was alone with his thoughts. He stared at the text in his hand, not taking in a word as his mind wandered.

He kept trying to come up with reasons to justify Voldemort's supposed… *control* over him, in some respects. Reasons other than the fact that he had a fragment of Voldemort's soul within him, that the reason might be something other than the unsolvable issue of Harry being a human horcrux.

Each explanation he came up with was worse.

It isn't a horcrux thing, I just naturally find him that attractive, so much so that I just… finished really quickly.

It isn't a horcrux thing, and I don't find him*,* specifically *very attractive, I just… always come really quickly.*

It isn't a horcrux thing, I don't find him that attractive, I do not always come that fast, and…

Okay, maybe he does have some *control over me.*

Harry groaned and rubbed his temples. Wasn't it bad enough that Voldemort made his scar hurt with a thought? How was it fair that he could also make him feel that thrumming warmth of the connection between them, and with a single touch make him pass out, or—

Come for your master.

God, damn it Harry, he berated himself, his face burning. *Thinking about it isn't going to make anything better. Quit thinking about it.*

…He couldn't stop thinking about it.

He's a bastard, I hate him, he is not my master*, and if it weren't for him threatening my friends, I would toss myself off a bridge so he'd be one step*

closer to death, Harry thought fiercely. *Everything about him is a lie, and the only reason I find any part of him attractive is because he went and changed his body, and… and I hate him.*

You dreamt about him in the Mirror of Erised, that horrible voice in the back of his mind said. He wasn't in his new body, then.

That was just a bloody dream, that means nothing.

You enjoyed it when he touched you.

I did not!

Yes, you did.

Well, fucking fine, of course I did, but it wasn't my fault!

Because it's a horcrux thing.

Yeah, because it's a horcrux thing!

He almost hit himself at his own internal argument, at which he had just proven his own point *against* himself. He did not *want* to come to terms with the fact that Voldemort could make him scream and sigh and faint and—and do other things so easily… especially not with how hypocritically Voldemort was dealing with his *own* desires.

One of these days, the Dark Lord's perfect sense of control was going to shatter, Harry was sure of it—and it would not end well for *Harry* when it did. Because if just *touching* made the light that blossomed between them increase, and mere *kissing* had been like fireworks bursting in his soul, then—

"The conservative party," Harry said loudly, interrupting himself and forcing his attention elsewhere, "is comprised mainly of—"

"*Blimey*, Harry!"

Harry jumped and dropped the book. "Ron!" he shouted, spotting him and his bright, fuzzy aura. "You're back!"

"Yeah," he said, "And you scared the hell out of me when you started shouting. Mrs. Malfoy just showed me my *room* and then how to get to where you were—this is place is massive, I'm going to get lost constantly if we have to stay here—but were you *reading*, just now? Out loud?"

Harry blushed and picked up the book he'd tossed. "Mighta been," he muttered. "But you! What happened at the Ministry, what did he make you do?"

Suddenly Ron was the one blushing. He turned a deep scarlet and had to look at the floor. "I, er, I can't tell you… Not until, ah, all the involved, necessary parties involve sign off."

"…*What?"*

Ron looked up, shrugged. "I can't tell you," he repeated. "Sorry."

Harry had a bad feeling. When he'd been asked to sign something last, he'd been forced to give away his property to Bellatrix Lestrange. "Was it something horrible? Can you tell me that, at least?"

Ron's blush was now so powerful that Harry could *feel* the heat radiating off him. His magic was chaotic, too, trembling and whirling with frazzled energy. "N-n-not terrible, no. I promise."

Harry scrutinized his face at length. "But you can't tell me."

"Nope."

A pause. Ron made a great show of looking around the library, though his face was still a bright crimson. "So, a library, huh? Where, uh… Where is Hermione?"

His voice had gotten extremely high when he said Hermione's name. "Asleep," Harry answered.

"Ah. Right, that makes sense. I reckon she should be."

Before Harry could say anything else, Ron grabbed his shoulder and looked into his eyes, his face full of uncharacteristic emotion. "I am really, really glad you're alive," he announced, to Harry's shock.

"I… I'm really glad you're alive too, Ron."

Ron smiled and looked at the many shelves of books. "So, reading then? That's what we're doing to while away the time in Malfoy Manor as captives. Excellent. Great day to read and not be dead."

Harry stared. First Hermione acting almost as though she'd been drugged, and now Ron, some weird mixture of embarrassed and… giddy?

"When will you be able to tell me what's going on?" Harry asked.

"In a few days… I think," Ron answered.

In a few days. After Hermione may or may not get approved for a wand, after…

My trial, Harry realized.

Were all the plans that Voldemort was currently setting into motion hinging on the outcome of his trial? An outcome which, Harry was sure, the Dark Lord already had meticulously planned…

"…Right."

Ron's slight smile fell. "Fred and George are being tried tomorrow," he said numbly. "I… I overheard some Ministry people talking about it, when I was there."

"They'll be all right," Harry said. "He told me that they wouldn't go to Azkaban, and he wouldn't have any reason to lie about that…"

"Yeah," Ron said, but he looked grim. "Yeah… Hey, I meant to ask you. Do you know anything about Neville? He's supposedly gone missing. I heard people talking about that, too."

Harry's blood ran cold. The remaining pinkness of Ron's blush left his face, replaced by fear.

Harry wanted to lie. He wanted to say that he had no idea. He wanted to spare Ron that pain, to shrug and say that he didn't know, maybe he'd gone on the run…

"…He's dead," Harry found himself whispering anyway. "He killed the snake, and now… He's dead, Ron."

Harry couldn't, however, bear to give him details. He couldn't tell Ron how Bellatrix had tortured him, how Neville had looked into Harry's eyes and *forgiven him*…

How it had been all Harry's fault.

Harry couldn't say any of that, and Ron didn't ask.

"Oh," he said hollowly, his magic wilting. "I… He… Will you excuse me?"

Ron left the way he came in, walking out of the library like he had already forgotten where he was and didn't want to remember. Harry watched him go, and felt something horrible stir in his chest.

It wasn't just the awful sadness for how Neville had died, though that was terrible enough on its own—it wasn't even the fact that he, Harry, was responsible—

It was that he had forgotten.

Harry had been *so* preoccupied with trying to decipher the Dark Lord's perplexing mood swings, with worrying over what would happen to Ron and Hermione and everyone else, that…

He hadn't thought about Neville once since the tragedy of his death.

…Was it a coping mechanism? Was that a typical response after witnessing such trauma—to force it from your mind? Harry didn't know, but he felt the tidal wave of guilt and shame crash over him, and suddenly, he couldn't breathe.

Harry fell to his knees and clutched at his chest, tears blurring his vision. His body ceased to function as it should. He couldn't inhale properly. It was like something was gripping his lungs, stopping the air from getting in.

Harry felt dizzy and sick and *how could he have forgotten?*

Somewhere, as though from a great distance, he thought he heard someone calling his name, but Harry wasn't sure.

Everything went dark.

The New Regime

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Blue and indigo, fuchsia and ruby. There was a kaleidoscope of colors whirling in the air, and the hues were moving to music.

Harry felt numb. He was laying on his side, swathed in something soft and warm. Though his mind stirred sluggishly, he found that he couldn't open his eyes.

Harry didn't need his sight, though—not to perceive the beautiful and familiar magic that belonged to Narcissa Malfoy.

She was holding him close, one arm draped over his shoulder as his head rested on her lap. He could hear the distinctive sound of her voice, though Harry could not make out the words. She sounded muffled—unnaturally so. It almost felt as though Harry's ears were stuffed with cotton.

In fact, his whole body felt very… *off*, like his muscles had been replaced with solid lead. Harry tried for a moment to lift his fingers, to once more open his eyes, but was unable to do so. He instead tried to recall what happened. He'd been in the library, and Ron had left, because…

Neville.

And then he, Harry, had been suddenly unable to breathe…

Harry deduced that he had been having some sort of panic attack. Narcissa must have found him, and…

She's done something to me, Harry realized without much effort. For he felt *beyond* calm as he lay there—though Narcissa's singing was more than soothing—he felt *drugged.*

She must have needed to place some spell on me to get me to stop panicking…

Harry was relieved—and surprised—to have been found by Narcissa at all, rather than wake up to the far too seductive, magnetic pull that was the Dark Lord. Perhaps Harry's fit had not been that devastating;

maybe Voldemort hadn't felt it from where he was in London, tending to political matters…

Harry tried to not dwell on such things—he could do nothing about them, anyway—and let the mesmeric feel of Narcissa's magic and song enchant him. Her aura shifted to a picturesque violet, and as Harry put forth a bit more effort, he could discern what it was she was saying.

"…*Good morning, my glory, good morning…*"

It was not a song Harry recognized. A slow, peaceful melody, somber yet sweet.

"*I've been waiting for you for hours…*"

Narcissa began to gently run her hands through his hair, and Harry might have sighed if he were able.

"*Good morning, my glory, good morning…*"

Her magic melted from a deep purple to a garnet red, her aura like liquid gemstones bleeding into each other. It was lovely. Harry wondered if this was her favorite song.

"*You are a beauty and a gift…*"

Blackness.

It came from somewhere behind them: dark, cold, and glimmering with bright slivers. *Concerned.*

Voldemort.

The Dark Lord had arrived, and in his typical fashion, he did not immediately announce his presence. If Harry could have reacted, he was sure he would have jumped, twitched, done *something*.

But he could not move at all.

"*You are the reward for painful patience…*"

Narcissa, completely unaware, continued to sing and stroke his hair. Her aura turned a brilliant tint of ocher, such a contrast to the blackness in the corner. Harry could feel Voldemort's worry, and realized then that he must have been wrong. Voldemort's concern could only mean that he *had* been aware of Harry's panic, and was

unsettled over it. He must not have been able to escape whatever it was he was doing at the Ministry until just now…

"*Good morning, my glory, good morning…"*

Harry could do nothing other than hold his breath as he felt the Dark Lord's shuddering magic… and *how* it shuddered when it shifted; the initial, glittering concern dissipated abruptly into—

Envy.

A putrid rage that was characterized by such a powerful envy that Harry felt sick with it. All traces of gold were *gone*. There was nothing but blackness emanating from the Dark Lord who lurked in the shadows, and it was *horrifying*.

Harry's pulse was racing for as still and heavy as his body was. Narcissa must have noticed something was amiss, for her magic stilled as she put a hand to his chest, surely feeling his thundering heartbeat. Her legs shifted beneath his head, and Narcissa leaned down, pulling his body closer to her before singing in an even softer, more angelic tone.

"*You always make me wait for hours…"*

Harry wanted to warn her, to push her away, but whatever magic she'd cast on him to end his panic attack earlier was still in effect. Narcissa was holding him and rocking him gently in her arms and Voldemort was *furious*—

Just when Harry was certain that something horrible was going to happen, it vanished.

The blackness, the jealous hatred, the all-encompassing wrath… Lord Voldemort disappeared, taking his hellacious aura with him.

Harry waited with his breath still held, unsure if the Dark Lord would be making a swift and murderous reappearance. After what felt like hours but was probably no more than a minute, he convinced himself that this would not be the case—Voldemort was not returning anytime soon.

Eventually, Harry's heartrate slowed. Narcissa kept singing in a low and lovely voice.

He tried to get lost in it once more, to let her magic carry him back to

sleep, but he couldn't. Voldemort's presence had lasted only a few seconds, flickering into the peacefulness of Narcissa's colorful ambience like a black cloud briefly eclipsing the sun… and though the blackness had faded, the terror he had invoked lingered. Harry had a bitter taste in his mouth and trepidation in his heart.

He *wanted* to let the false sense of security take him. More than anything in the world, Harry *wanted* to let Narcissa hold him and pretend that this was something normal and innocent: that he was just a child who was sick, perhaps, and this was his mother, reassuring him that all would be well…

But that reality which Harry so desperately wished for had always been denied him, and he could not fantasize about it now.

"*Good morning, my glory, good morning…"*

There was no glory in this.

He must have fallen asleep at some point, because when Harry finally could open his eyes, Narcissa was gone. He was alone in his room.

Harry blinked up at his reflection, the strange mirror above the bed no longer jarring though still rather unwelcome. He felt off as he sat up, a slow and difficult movement. He wondered if he was still being affected by whatever Narcissa had done to calm him down, or if he was just naturally so drained. Pushing the covers off took far too much effort.

Moving carefully, Harry swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood. He rubbed his eyes and forced himself to focus.

How much time had passed? Harry glanced at the clock, and saw that it read a little after eight—though whether that was in the morning or afternoon, he hadn't the foggiest idea. There were no windows in this room, only garish wallpaper and an unnecessary number of mirrors.

Harry stretched his arms above his head and failed to stifle a yawn. He was midway through the action when he felt it again—the telltale sensation of darkness, of Voldemort's magic.

The Dark Lord was back, once more silent in his re-emergence, but his aura could not have been more different than the last time he'd appeared. It was lively, gleaming with speckled gold—and when Harry yawned, it swelled with an incomprehensible *fondness*.

Harry lowered his arms and tried to act unaware. He had taken only two steps towards the door when he was struck with that pulsating warmth—the mental bond between them sparking to life with a soft yet inviting light, almost like a greeting.

In comparison to how his magic had been before, this energy felt… *sweet.*

Voldemort's hand was around his wrist before Harry could turn—not a forceful grasp, but a light, tender hold. He moved so close that his chest was against Harry's back, making warmth blossom everywhere they touched. The sensation chased away Harry's mental haziness like a sunrise obliterating a fog.

"Good morning."

Voldemort's tone was laced with a hint of amusement and disarming affection. Harry swallowed thickly, trying keep his composure—a difficult task when Voldemort was in the vicinity, channeling that radiance between them with such expertise.

Harry had the distressing notion that the Dark Lord was getting better at this.

"What's happening?" Harry skipped the greeting and turned to face him;Voldemort keeping a loose hold on his wrist as he did. "Are Fred and George's trials happening soon, are—"

"They have already happened."

"…But… but you said it was morning. Unless you were just saying that?"

"It *is* morning. It is Friday."

"…*What?"*

Voldemort tightened his hold on Harry's wrist as his confusion turned to anxiety. "You mean—I've been—"

"In a relatively comatose state for the past day, yes," Voldemort said. The light between them intensified, making it difficult for Harry to be as incensed as he would like to be. He tried to wrench his arm from Voldemort's grip, but was unable to do so.

"But—but *why?"*

"Because your emotions," Voldemort said, pulling him closer, "were a *distraction*."

He said it as though he found Harry's feelings nothing more than a mild nuisance, but Harry knew this was a lie. He had felt genuine worry in Voldemort's magic when he'd first appeared to spy on him with Narcissa, bordering on *fear*, and Harry knew that it must have been debilitating for him.

Voldemort had nearly lost his human horcrux once, after all.

Harry scoffed and tried to step away. Voldemort, unsurprisingly, did not allow it. "Do you no longer wish to know what has happened to your friends?" he asked lightly, though there was an edge to his voice that spoke of a greater warning—*do not move without permission, or suffer the consequences.*

Harry grit his teeth, nodding and holding his tongue. Voldemort put his free hand on Harry's neck, making the connection between them grow, distractingly so. Harry willed himself to pay attention. "Fred and George Weasley have been given a similar sentence to their brother, though they shall be serving at the Ministry of Magic for a period of two years rather than six months. Their transgressions were greater, after all... Should they perform well, they shall regain the privilege of their wands after this time."

"Working in the Muggle-born Registration Commission?" Harry couldn't help but ask. "For two years? With *Umbridge*?"

"Yes."

Harry grimaced. He could only imagine the smug look on Umbridge's face as they were given their sentence, considering how her *last* interaction with the Weasley twins had gone.

'*Give her hell from us, Peeves!'*

It could not possibly bode well for them. "They might prefer Azkaban," Harry muttered.

Voldemort laughed softly, his breath warm against Harry's temple. His fingers were trailing up his neck, once more intertwining in Harry's mess of hair. "How do you feel?" he asked, and though his tone was even, his magic glimmered with concern.

"F-fine," Harry stuttered, momentarily caught up in the pleasant

feeling of that light.

"Good… You have an *exciting* day ahead of you, after all…"

This statement made Harry's thoughts snap back to reality. It was Friday. *It was Friday.* "I have a trial," he said with a blank horror.

"Yes."

Voldemort, in great contrast, sounded rather lax about the whole thing. He had even closed his eyes, far more focused on the alluring light that was thrumming between them than Harry's imminent trial.

"But you haven't told me anything!"

This time, in his sudden panic, Harry managed to break away from him. The light flickered with the loss of physical contact, lessening significantly as he stepped backwards.

Harry immediately wished he hadn't done it. Voldemort's magic convulsed with a sharp anger as he did, and Harry couldn't help but think of a wild animal that had just had its recently acquired prey taken from it.

His expression was livid.

The Dark Lord, who was usually exceptional at concealing his true emotions with a cold mask of indifference, was unable to do so now. His crimson eyes were bright with wrath when the light he had been so shamelessly basking in diminished.

Fear licked up Harry's spine, but he refused to let it overwhelm him. "You haven't told me what you want me to say, what you want me to *do!*" he said, holding his arms out to his sides in exasperation. The last thing he wanted was to say the wrong thing and make Voldemort even angrier, not when he had his friends held captive.

He wouldn't be the cause for anyone else's suffering.

Voldemort considered him for a moment before his annoyed expression slipped away, his lips curling into a smirk. "Oh, Harry… always so concerned for everyone but yourself…"

The feelings of patronizing fondness were once more so strong in his aura that Harry had to clench his jaw to stop himself from shouting. His hand curled into fists.

"Your role is simple," Voldemort continued, moving closer to him. Though Harry wanted to shove him away, to do something stupid, he did not. Voldemort grabbed both his wrists, light radiating from his fingers with an intense and disorienting heat. Harry's muscles relaxed involuntarily, and Voldemort unfurled his fists with ease. He intertwined Harry's fingers between his own.

It was too much. Harry's eyes fluttered shut and he sighed, nearly *moaned* when Voldemort spoke with his mouth against Harry's ear.

"All I require of you, my *Undesirable*…"

He paused, taking a moment to graze his lips along Harry's neck, the ghost of a kiss enough to make Harry's breath hitch and his pulse quicken. Voldemort laughed, another soft and breathy sound, before returning his lips to his ear.

"…is that you be yourself."

Harry winced when the so-called auror forced him towards the green flames, his wand hitting him with some curse that was far more painful than a mere stinging hex. Harry scowled at him. It wasn't exactly *easy* to walk with heavy chains wrapped around his ankles and shackles binding his wrists together.

He hadn't had much time to gather his bearings after Voldemort had left him.

Harry had not even been able to see Hermione or Ron before Narcissa was fussing over him, giving him clean robes and attempting once more to fix his unruly hair—until she remembered that Harry was supposed to look as though he'd been staying in a cell, not a mansion. He was then ushered out into the foyer of Malfoy Manor, where no less than six massive, brutish looking wizards awaited him. Narcissa explained that they were aurors, but Harry could tell at once that they were *dark* wizards. Their auras were all deep and unsettling shades, making Harry feel queasy. He tried not to focus on them.

"Don't worry," Narcissa had said in an attempt at sounding reassuring. "I will be there, in the courtroom, along with my family…"

The fact that the Malfoys would be watching his trial was anything but encouraging to Harry. He was relieved, if also unsurprised, to hear that Hermione and Ron would be staying at the manor. If it were up

to him, *no one* would witness this event.

Unfortunately, *many* people would be present. The Malfoys left long before him, just as Harry was certain Voldemort was already at the Ministry, waiting for his so-called suspected criminal to arrive and await his judgment. Narcissa had given Harry a brief but warm hug before departing. Draco and Lucius didn't look at him, only went straight into the fireplace and disappeared.

Once the Malfoys had gone, the aurors had laden Harry with chains. Obviously, this group of wizards was important enough to be in on the fact that Harry Potter was *not* being held at Azkaban. Harry wondered if they were newly-made Death Eaters, like Hermione…

He tried not to focus on that, either.

Regardless, the rest of the wizarding world thought that Harry Potter was being kept in a maximum-security cell in Azkaban, and so he was made to look the part of vigilante and prisoner.

The chains were heavy on his frame, suffocating in every sense of the word. The moment his anger spiked in annoyance for being hexed, the thick collar on Harry's neck burned—a sensation reminiscent of the scorching, animate snakes that Voldemort had once cursed him with. A magically suppressing collar, just like the one Ron had been wearing when he was in Azkaban. It was worse than painful; it made Harry feel like there was something dark and heavy in his chest, repressing his magic.

Harry took a deep breath and stepped into the fire.

Everyone was staring.

There was a split second in which it seemed all was perfectly still. Hundreds of people were gathered in the atrium of the Ministry in anticipation of *the* Undesirable's arrival for his public trial, watching with wide, curious eyes. For a moment, Harry was wholly distracted—but not by their bright expressions or unsettling gazes.

It was their *magic*.

The magical auras of so many people in one place was dazzling; a sea of mottled colors, textures, and glimmering light. Each witch and wizard had one, a unique flavor that contrasted with the person who was beside them. No two were alike.

Upon arriving, this vision of magic consumed Harry entirely. He thought he might faint from the sheer overabundance of it all.

Then cameras were flashing, people were shouting, enchanted microphones were being shoved towards him, and Harry came crashing back to reality. He couldn't make out one voice over another, and he found that when he forced himself to not dwell on their magic, their auras were less distracting.

He could not, however, ignore their shouts.

"Mr. Potter, look over here!"

"Potter, let us see your eyes!"

Harry did his best to not look at any of them, moving as quickly as was possible. The aurors flicked their wands, instructing the reporters to give them space so that they could move, but they only half-succeeded. There was no stopping the onslaught.

"Potter! Is it true you disarmed two aurors before being detained?"

"Did you know before arriving that the Dark Lord dismissed the dementors, *Harry*?"

The last voice stood out from the others. Harry's eyes snapped up to settle on none other than Rita Skeeter.

The new regime suited her well—she was back to her old self, her hair glossy and lovely, her make-up flawless and her crystal-encrusted glasses polished. She smiled with triumph at having accomplished what her fellow reporters had failed to do—winning Harry's undivided, if fleeting, attention. "What?" he gasped, unable to stop himself.

The flashes of light that went off from behind her were nearly blinding, but Harry kept his eyes on Skeeter's. He could make out the distinction of her aura—a bright, bubbly turquoise. "The Dark Lord has disbanded the use of dementors for your trial, given your history with how detrimentally they affect you," she said. "An act of mercy on his part. How does that make you *feel?"*

She shoved the microphone under his chin. A quick quill and a piece of parchment seemingly appeared out of nowhere, ready to jot down whatever contrived version of the statement Harry was about to make, he was sure. Harry gaped at her malicious grin, and for a moment,

everything seemed to come to a standstill. The cameras stopped, and even the aurors who were supposed to be forcing him onward had paused, watching him curiously.

Harry glanced at the floating quill before looking back to Rita, glaring. His angry expression had more of an impact than he would have thought—the excited reporter winced, and her magic withered.

Then he remembered. It was probably extremely unsettling to have scarlet eyes the same color as the *merciful* Dark Lord's fixated on you.

Disbanded the use of dementors…

Harry had almost forgotten that the Ministry was using dementors for the Muggle-born trials at all. But he knew the real reason Voldemort was keeping them away, and it had *nothing* to do with kindness.

Yet it was, evidently, widely known that dementors affected Harry Potter quite powerfully… and Rita Skeeter had the nerve to ask him how this made him *feel*. Harry leaned in closer to the microphone, looked directly at her, and smiled.

"Go fuck yourself, Rita Skeeter."

There were gasps and laughter and even an appalled shriek, but Harry only registered the shock on Skeeter's face before he was forced onward by his guard. They moved past the other reporters and spectators whom Harry could only assume were not important enough to be able to witness the trial themselves, down in the courtroom. Fearful that he may see someone *else* he recognized and wanting to avoid that for as long as possible, Harry aimed his gaze upwards, over their heads. He kept his chin high, despite how mortifying it was to be dragged through the atrium in such a manner.

The Ministry of Magic was much like Harry recalled it from the time he, Ron, and Hermione had infiltrated it while under the guise of Polyjuice Potion, with a few notable differences. The massive sculpture of a handsome wizard and witch upon thrones constructed of living, tormented muggles remained, black stone with foot-high letters carved onto the front: *Magic is Might.* But there was something else that caught Harry's eyes, something flickering.

It was a banner.

High up near the ceilings, where Harry was fairly certain there used to be British flags, were now large banners of deepest green. They were

all the same, each with a massive *V* in the center, a single letter shining in gold. Encircled around this gilded character was a serpent in equally bright but contrasting silver; a snake which was in a perfect circle, its jaw open as it consumed its own tail, its gleaming head and pointed teeth centered directly in the middle of the golden prongs of the *V*. The banners were so large that even from far away, Harry could see the serpent's single, visible eye was red, a small but vibrant scarlet.

Just like Voldemort's eyes… just like *his* eyes.

Harry stared at it. The Dark Lord had crafted himself a new emblem, then. He couldn't deny that it was imposing; the *V* reminded him of a Roman numeral, powerful and bold. But what confused Harry was the colors he had chosen. The green and the silver he understood, and perhaps even the red, considering they were the hue of his *own* eyes.

…But *gold?*

He was forced onwards.

By the time they made it to the gilded lift, Harry felt like he had walked ten miles. The aurors had to work exceptionally hard to get the crowd to back away enough for Harry to make it into the elevator, and three of them remained outside the gates, keeping them at bay. The other three guards stepped onto the platform with him, wands up and ready, and the doors slowly closed.

When they did, it was like all the air had been sucked out of the room. Everything was quiet and still, the ceasing of camera flashes jarring.

They went down.

'Level 9, the Department of Mysteries.'

Harry was not surprised at these words, but they still made his blood run cold. The gates slid open, and it was the most surreal sense of déjà vu, to be walking these halls once more… Only he was not accompanied by Arthur Weasley this time, and the stakes were so much higher.

The courtrooms on level ten were accessible only by stairwell. Harry might have stumbled and fallen in his constraints if one of the aurors had not held him steady, a painfully tight grasp on his arm.

Finally, they made it to the courtroom—and *of course* it was the same courtroom he'd been in before, Harry thought with a scowl. The doors

were still closed, and one of the aurors checked his watch. Harry could see the time as well—it was five minutes to eleven, which was when his trial was officially set to begin.

At least he was early this time, Harry thought morbidly.

"Stay still." One of the wizards pointed his wand at Harry's chains, and they broke apart and fell into his waiting palms. Harry's hands flew to his throat once he was finally free from the collar, the weight of it suppressing his magic almost enough to make him sigh.

"It's time," the same man said. Harry nodded and took a deep breath, bracing himself.

They opened the doors.

The familiar, dungeon-like hall of courtroom ten filled Harry with dread. The dark stone walls, the torches which illuminated the space with an eerie glow… Along the perimeter of the courtroom were a decent number of spectators—Harry spied the Malfoys, as well as a few other vaguely familiar pureblood families. They were all murmuring to each other in hushed voices, soft but lively whispers. Harry decidedly did not look at them, afraid of who might be in the audience, who he might make eye contact with. Besides, his focus was quickly ensnared by the man directly in front of him, at the end of the courtroom.

Voldemort was like a King upon a throne.

Harry hated that this was the thought that came to his mind, but it was. The Dark Lord was taller, grander, and far more imposing than anyone else in the hall. He was the only one to not be wearing the official, plum-colored robes of the Wizengamot which were embroidered with a silver 'W', even though he was Chief Warlock. Voldemort was wearing black, and fixed on his chest was a gleaming pin of the same emblem representing the Wizarding High Court of Law—but his 'W' was larger, and made of gold.

Harry had not truly appreciated just how… *striking* the Dark Lord was, with his unnaturally pale skin and vivid, scarlet eyes. He was an enthralling sight to behold, and that was even without taking his distracting magic into account. Voldemort's aura glistened in anticipation when the doors opened and Harry Potter was revealed, but his handsome face remained unreadable.

Harry might have remained there, staring stupidly, if the aurors at his

side didn’t push him forward. Harry's eyes flickered to those who were gathered at the Dark Lord's side as he walked. The entire Wizengamot was present, though Harry recognized almost none of them… with the exception of one.

Dolores Umbridge was failing to suppress her gloating, vindictive smile.

A rush of hatred so deep it was almost debilitating coursed through Harry at the sight of her. Umbridge's giant eyes widened at his expression, and her magic brightened, too—a vivid, unattractive yellow that reminded Harry of some kind of poisonous toad.

Harry tore his eyes away, and he was then distracted by a head of flaming red hair. Sitting at a wooden desk between the crowds of spectators and the jury was someone else Harry recognized.

Percy Weasley.

Harry almost couldn't believe it. Percy was here, and he was resolutely not looking at him, his eyes focused instead on the parchment at his desk in front of him. He was recording the trial, just like he had years ago, surrounded by an aura of an amber-ish hue…

Harry was beyond baffled. Had Percy Weasley avoided all punishment, then, despite the fact that he had fought against the Dark Lord in the end? Had he been pardoned in order to keep him in the Ministry's clutches—another weapon to be used against his family, perhaps?

Harry wasn't sure. He was forced to look away from him when one of the aurors roughly shoved him forward again, towards the center of the hall, where his gaze landed on the only item present there.

A single chair, and there were many heavy, threatening looking chains curling on the floor around it. Harry had a dark sense of foreboding that his freedom from shackles was going to be short-lived. He felt the weight of everyone's eyes on him as he was ushered towards it, and did his best not to tremble as he went.

The aurors motioned for him to sit. Reluctantly, begrudgingly, Harry did.

The reaction was instant. Harry hissed in pain and his eyes clamped shut as the chains flew from the floor, ensnaring his wrists and legs with a viciously. They were so violent that the aurors all scrambled

away, nearly tripping in their haste to get away from them. They fled to some vacant seats to Harry's right, where they were clearly meant to preside for the rest of the trial.

"Quite unnecessary."

The chains loosened and fell back to the floor. The murmuring died the moment the Dark Lord spoke, and the hall became quiet.

Harry did not immediately open his eyes, but he could sense the Dark Lord's magic glimmering. He rubbed his wrists where the chains had nearly broken the skin.

"Harry James Potter."

Harry looked up.

It was as if the entire courtroom was holding its breath as Voldemort assessed him. "You stand accused of involvement of the murder of Albus Dumbledore, of the attempted murder of several Ministry officials, and of opposing the Ministry of Magic's new regime… treason," he said with little emotion in his voice—yet his magic flickered, twitching excitedly.

"Before the trial commences," he went on, "it has been decided that extraordinary measures and precautions must be taken. The Ministry of Magic is adamant that the public have no doubt in their minds that this is a fair trial… An *honest* trial. And so, before we begin…"

Voldemort gestured towards one of the guards to the left of the jury. The tall wizard had a glass phial in his hands. At the Dark Lord's nod, he held the small tube up so that the crowd could see.

"Veritaserum."

Harry gaped as the guard walked towards him, the serum in his hands that Harry was quite certain he could not take, if he wanted to make sure not to displease Voldemort in some manner.

"And to test the potion for authenticity…" A different guard turned and opened a door on the other side of the hall. A moment later, and Harry felt another sickening jolt of shock.

Walking alongside the second guard was Horace Slughorn. Harry watched in disbelief as his old Potions Professor shuffled towards him, his eyes on the man holding the phial. His magic was a heavy and

gray, full of despair. He walked past Harry without looking at him.

"Horace Slughorn," Voldemort said quietly, and the crowd began muttering in animated, hushed voices again.

Slughorn only briefly glanced at the Dark Lord before nodding. He seemed unable to look at him more than that, and of course Harry understood why. Voldemort was speaking, addressing the crowds as he listed off Slughorn's credentials—Potions Master as Hogwarts for over forty years, Founder of the Apothercarium of Horace E. F. Slughorn, 'Outstanding's' in Potions at both the O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. level—but Harry hardly heard him as his mind raced.

Most people may not have known or recognized the striking face of Tom Riddle, but Horace Slughorn surely did. He didn't look exactly the same, of course—the Tom Riddle of the past was not so deathly pale, his cheeks not quite as gaunt, and, of course, those eyes—but the resemblance was clearly there to those who knew it. Harry was sure that Slughorn was hardly aware what Voldemort was saying, either, and was instead hearing different words…

…Can one split the soul only once…? For instance, isn't seven…

Once Voldemort was done, Slughorn waved his wand and conjured up a small table. He then took the veritaserum from the guard and began examining it in earnest, beads of sweat visibly forming on his forehead. He conjured up another container, magically filling it with some strange liquid. He was standing not even two feet in front of Harry; facing him, even, but he refused to so much as look at him.

Harry was incensed. He watched as Horace Slughorn, the man who had stated before how much he *adored* his mother, how much he *detested* the Death Eaters, was now clearly working on Voldemort's orders. It filled Harry with rage. He didn't care that he was probably forced into it just like everyone else; Harry was suddenly furious, because Slughorn didn't have the courage to acknowledge him.

"Look at me."

Harry said it so quietly that only Slughorn would be able to hear. He paused for a second, but then continued his examination of the serum, ignoring him. Slughorn poured one drop of veritaserum into the container he had conjured, and the strange liquid, which was clear before, suddenly turned green.

"*Look at me,"* Harry hissed again, malice in his voice.

This time, Slughorn did look. His beady eyes locked onto Harry's, and his lined face contorted into a pained expression. Harry didn't blink. He wanted him to see, to look into his green eyes and see his mother there…

And then he remembered that he no longer had Lily's eyes—a fact which Harry was still so quick to forget.

Slughorn swallowed, and quietly, so quietly Harry almost didn't hear it, said, "I'm sorry."

Harry wanted to jump out of the chair and rip the veritaserum from his hands, but even as he had the thought the shackles on either side of him twitched. They had, evidently, felt his surge of emotion, and were prepared to bind him again at a moment's notice.

Slughorn turned away from him and held the phial up in his hands. He addressed the Wizengamot directly when he said, "It is pure."

More muttering from the crowd. Slughorn was escorted not from the courtroom from whence he had come, but to a seat in the crowds.

The first guard thrust the phial towards Harry. "Drink," he commanded. Harry took it, his heart pounding. Was this all supposed to happen? Was this *really* veritaserum, or had that all been an act? If it was, he couldn't possibly drink it, for surely he would say something that would go against the Dark Lord's wishes. He glanced at Voldemort, searching for confirmation that this was all according to plan…

But there was no indication of anything whatsoever in that passive, emotionless face. His scarlet eyes were indecipherable, and his glimmering magic, while whirling, gave Harry little reassurance.

"Drink," the guard said again, this time pulling out his wand. Feeling there was nothing else he could do, Harry slowly lifted the phial to his lips, and drank.

It tasted like nothing. It felt like nothing. Of course, that was how it was *supposed* to taste and feel, but… had it worked? Harry didn't feel any different at all.

Before he could contemplate the matter further, Voldemort spoke again. The quiet muttering from the crowd ceased.

"In order to further assure the public that this is, indeed, Harry James

Potter, a second precaution has been decided upon." Voldemort made another gesture towards the guard which had escorted Slughorn to his seat. He nodded and left the room, presumably going to retrieve someone else. Harry wondered what familiar face he was going to see this time.

He was surprised when the man returned not with another person, but with a thin, wooden box. The guard stood next to Harry, holding the box in his hands as though it were the most precious item in the world.

"It has become somewhat common knowledge that Harry James Potter is capable of producing a corporeal patronus," Voldemort said. "Tell us, Mr. Potter, what form does your patronus take?"

Harry swallowed. "A st-stag," he answered, and his voice sounded hoarse. "It's always a stag."

That was the truth, he hadn't needed to lie; but the words hadn't felt like they had just burst out of him, either… Was the veritaserum working? Harry didn't know.

More hushed murmurings in agreement from the spectators. Voldemort glanced at the guard next to Harry and nodded.

"Please," the Dark Lord said, and his voice was slightly lower now as he looked back to Harry. "Produce one for us."

The guard opened the box, and Harry saw, to his astonishment, a wand. And not just *any* wand, it was *Voldemort's* wand… his *original* wand, yew with the phoenix feather core. A feather from Fawkes, the same that had been in his broken wand, which was vanished now, gone…

"Get up," the guard seethed under his breath. Awkwardly, Harry stood, the blood rushing dangerously fast to his head when he did.

He didn't think it was possible for his heart to beat any faster. He was actually being expected to produce a patronus? *Now?* After all that he'd been through, after not having a wand in his hand for weeks…

Harry did not think he could do it.

He glanced nervously from Voldemort to the wand and back again, as though this must be a trap. For the first time, the Dark Lord's face betrayed the ghost of an emotion—his lip twitched ever so slightly in

what Harry knew was amusement. "By all means," he said, and although Harry could see that same amusement dancing in his magic, his voice was flat and emotionless.

Harry's mouth went completely dry. He wet his lips in anticipation as he reached for the wand, wiping his sweaty palms on his robes before he did.

It felt warm in his hands. Like the phoenix feather core recognized him, like an old friend. It was a disquieting feeling, considering that this was the wand which had killed his parents, which had attempted to kill *him*…

For a long time, Harry did not move. A patronus. *Something happy, think of something happy*…

A more difficult request could not have been asked of him. Why hadn't he been warned about this, Harry thought bitterly; if he had been told ahead of time, he could have at least had a happy memory ready to go… for now he could think of *nothing,* not a single happy thought came to mind. His old go-to's were all tainted. He could not think of Hermione's warm smile without hearing her screams as the Dark Mark was burned onto her skin; he could not think of Ron without seeing his face go slack with cold realization as Harry told him that Neville was *dead*…

He could not think of G—

No.

He *could not* think of her.

The seconds slowly ticked by, turning into minutes during which Harry stood there, still as a statue with the wand in his hand. He had his eyes closed tight as his thoughts raced… Something happy, something happy… The crowd was beginning to grow restless, the murmuring was growing louder…

"*Hem, hem."*

Harry's eyes snapped open at that most awful of sounds. Umbridge, clearing her throat in impatience. Harry glared, the heat rising to his face as he stared at her wide, toad-like mouth. She grinned again when he looked at her, seemingly unbothered by Harry's red eyes. She *relished* watching him squirm in his horrible situation…

Harry clenched his fist tightly around the wand in his hand, the words *'I shall not tell lies'* still visible there as a faded scar, right beneath the recent addition of his name. He imagined a world without Dolores Umbridge. The idea of her having never existed made him smile, a world where everyone she ever hurt was free from pain, and that, Harry thought, was the closest thing he was going to get to happiness.

Her smug expression faltered at Harry's grin. He was staring right at her when he raised the wand, pointing it towards her, and for a moment the tension in the room was paramount—her face paled—

"*Expecto patronum!"* he shouted… and there it was.

A magnificent, silver stag burst forth from the wand tip. It charged with a staggering speed, straight towards Umbridge's aghast face. She screamed and ducked beneath the ledge as the stag lowered its antlers as if to run her down. The old wizards on either side of her jostled out of the way, causing a bit of a commotion.

But of course, it couldn't really harm any of them. The patronus passed straight through, cantering about and making a wide loop before returning to Harry's side. The stag hovered next to him, and as Harry looked at it, he was filled with something that had been so long absent from his life that it felt foreign to him now.

Hope.

Here, in the form of a glowing stag, the same as his father's, was proof of something that Harry hadn't realized he'd needed. He really was still himself, deep down, the same Harry James Potter he'd always been.

Umbridge's face was bright red as she pulled herself up, her magic frazzled. She looked mutinous as she glowered down at him, but a few of the spectators, to Harry's surprise, were laughing.

"There you have it." Voldemort still had an undecipherable expression on his face. His magic lessened in its intensity, and Harry thought he perceived the strangest emotion in it.

…Disappointment?

"The irrefutable Harry James Potter."

Had he done something wrong by succeeding?

The guard which had brought him the wand shoved the box towards him, open, clearly indicating that he should return the wand. Harry gave his patronus one last look. The presence of the silver stag had given him a new-found sense of courage. He took a deep breath before letting the wand fall from his fingertips into the wooden box, and his patronus vanished.

The guard motioned for him to be seated once again. Harry looked at Voldemort, the dark wizard staring down at him intently, impenetrable mask artfully in place. And, although still nervous, although the silvery glow of his patronus had gone, the strength it had imparted in Harry remained. He sat.

The shackles twitched slightly, but did not bind him.

Voldemort's red eyes were fixed on him, his magic rising behind him like an ethereal crown of black and gold.

"Let us begin."

Chapter End Notes

fanart by LadyZombieDraws

Subjective

Chapter Notes

Major thanks to Lena for beta'ing this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The entire courtroom's attention was fixed on Harry, but Harry's focus was only for the Dark Lord.

Voldemort must have been implementing Occlumency against him, for Harry could not feel so much as a trace of his emotions. There was no light, no warmth, and no hint of an expression on his face. Were it not for Harry's newfound ability to sense magic, he might have been convinced that the Dark lord did not feel at all.

To the naked eye, Voldemort appeared an emotionless figure of power.

A lie.

"You first stand accused of being involved with the murder of Albus Dumbledore," Voldemort began in a toneless voice. "How do you plead, Mr. Potter?"

"Not guilty."

"Did you witness this murder?"

Harry's eyes fell to the floor as his mind flashed to that fateful night, one of many memories which would forever haunt him. Albus Dumbledore, his posture stooped and his hand blackened, a curse colliding with his chest before he was flung backwards, falling…

And Harry hadn't been able to move. He hadn't been able to do anything.

"Yes," he answered quietly. "I witnessed his murder."

"When and where did it happen?"

"At the end of June last year, the 30th, I believe… at Hogwarts. He… was cursed, and fell from the Astronomy tower."

"Who cast the curse that ultimately killed Albus Dumbledore?"

Harry's focus betrayed him—his eyes flickered to where he'd seen the Malfoys sitting, and he made eye contact with Draco. His silvery magic glinted in alarm, but Harry was looking away again before Draco's face could convey an emotion.

"Severus Snape," Harry answered, his attention once more on the Dark Lord.

Voldemort's expression remained blank, but the witches and wizards of the court all reacted in obvious, if silent, ways. Their eyes widened, their magic whirled. Harry wondered how many of them had known that the man who next claimed the title of Headmaster had *murdered* his predecessor. To his side, Harry perceived a wave of relief that stuck out from the rest—from Draco, probably, or maybe Narcissa.

"You witnessed *Severus Snape,* previous Potions professor, murder Albus Dumbledore on the top of the Astronomy tower on the night of June 30th, 1997," Voldemort stated. His magic had flashed perilously at Snape's name. "Is this correct, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes."

"And you were in no way involved with the planning or executing of this crime?"

"No, I wasn't."

"Did you have any knowledge prior to Albus Dumbledore's death that such a violent act would be taking place on the night of June 30th, 1997, that could in any manner condemn you to being accurately labeled as an accessory to murder?"

Harry's thoughts raced, trying to process the words which so quickly and emotionlessly left Voldemort's mouth. He shook his head. "No… No, I had no idea that was going to happen. Albus Dumbledore's death was a shock." A pause. "A tragic shock," he added, voice thick with emotion.

Harry hardly cared that, in the end, Dumbledore had betrayed him. He couldn't harbor any resentment towards the man whom he had looked upon with such great respect for so many years.

Who had died so horribly, in the end…

"…A tragic shock."

Voldemort repeated the words with no inflection, but his magic darkened. Harry's skin crawled at the quality of it.

"All in favor," Voldemort said, raising his voice, "in clearing the accused of the charges concerning his involvement with the murder, or accessory to murder, of Albus Dumbledore?"

There was a moment where the members of the Wizengamot glanced at each other, but then, one right after another, they began to raise their hands… A few at first, and then—

All of them. With Dolores Umbridge being the last to put her short arm in the air, every member of the Wizengamot had voted in favor of Harry's innocence on this matter.

Which should not have been surprising, because he *was* innocent, but Harry felt an unwarranted rush of relief all the same. Voldemort's face remained impassive as his eyes swept over the many raised arms, though his magic glinted with a sort of mild satisfaction.

"Very well," Voldemort said, his focus returning to Harry. "Mr. Potter, you are hereby cleared of the charges of murder, and accessory to murder… in the case of Albus Dumbledore."

Harry's feeling of relief vanished. It was never that accusation he had been concerned about, anyway. That had all just been a contrived accusation, an excuse to have the Ministry looking for him before it was completely under Voldemort's control. Harry had no reason to fear he would be condemned for *that* crime.

The rest of his charges, though…

If Voldemort was not planning on tossing him in Azkaban—and Harry knew he was not—then Harry hadn't a clue on how he was going to make him seem innocent in the eyes of this regime.

In a Ministry run by Lord Voldemort, Harry Potter was *not* innocent.

"You also stand accused of opposing the Ministry of Magic on a number of accounts… This includes fleeing when there was a warrant out for your arrest, attempting to consort with known rebels, and violent assaults against Ministry officials. *Treason.*"

Harry's heart raced, wondering how Voldemort was going to approach this. If he simply asked, 'how do you plead?' and Harry really had just taken veritaserum…

"Tell us, Mr. Potter… about your relationship with the now deceased Albus Dumbledore."

"Er… what?"

Harry was not the only one who was baffled. The spectators shifted animatedly as well, sharing confused looks.

"Tell us about your previous relationship with Albus Dumbledore," Voldemort repeated.

Harry stared, unsure of where to even begin with such a request, and deeply concerned as to *why* it was being asked.

"Where and when did you first meet Dumbledore?" the Dark Lord prompted, using a much simpler, direct question when Harry remained speechless.

"A-at Hogwarts," Harry finally stuttered out. "I first met him at Hogwarts, when I was eleven."

"At Hogwarts." Voldemort's magic writhed, but Harry wasn't sure what the emotion simmering there meant. "You are saying that Albus Dumbledore, then Headmaster, did not come to see or speak to you, Harry Potter, *the Boy Who Lived*, before you arrived at Hogwarts alongside the other first-year students."

"Yes."

The muttering of the crowd grew louder; Harry was beginning to find it distracting. It dissipated when Voldemort spoke again. "Tell us, Mr. Potter… Where did you grow up?"

Another baffling question. "Number 4, Privet Drive. Little Whinging, in Surrey."

"With your muggle relatives, Petunia and Vernon Dursley, your aunt and uncle, as well as your cousin. Is this correct?"

"Yes," Harry said, and he couldn't help but think it was the most surreal thing in the world, to hear the Dark Lord say the word 'Dursley'. It was even stranger than when Vernon had mispronounced 'Voldemort'.

"Did your relatives ever inform you that you were a child with magical capabilities, Mr. Potter?" Voldemort asked. "Surely, if Albus

Dumbledore left you in their care, they were made fully aware that you were a magical child. Petunia Dursley knew about witches and wizards. Her own sister attended Hogwarts and married a pureblood wizard. Did Petunia Dursley tell you that you were a wizard?"

"No. She never told me."

"And why would she conceal this from you, do you think?"

"She—and my uncle, too—they *hated* magic," Harry said, the answer leaving his mouth before he had even thought it through. Instantly, the room became fraught with tension. Muttering that was undeniably irate reverberated around him.

"So much so that they concealed your ancestry from you, raising you to believe you were a mere muggle as well?"

"Yes." Harry was trying to see where this was headed, but his concentration was derailed by the spiteful whispers surrounding him from all sides, the pureblood families disgusted at the concept of his life.

"Was Albus Dumbledore ever in contact with your muggle relatives, to your knowledge?" Voldemort continued.

"Yes. Dumbledore had sent my aunt letters…"

"Do you know what they were pertaining to, specifically?"

"Well, me, obviously." Voldemort's magic flashed, and his face *almost* betrayed his annoyance at the blunt and uninformative response.

"What *about* you, Mr. Potter?"

"They, er… They were pretty much all threats to stop my aunt from throwing me out, as far as I know," Harry said.

"Am I therefore correct in saying, Mr. Potter, that Albus Dumbledore knowingly sent you to live with muggles who not only detested magic, but who went out of their way to conceal from you your magical heritage? Who were, in fact, purposefully *neglectful* towards you *because* you were a wizard?"

Harry felt like there was something lodged in his throat, making it difficult to swallow, to breathe, to speak. "Yes," he said, despite this.

"Yes, he… I suppose he did. And they were."

"An unsettlingly common situation," Voldemort said, addressing the Wizengamot and spectators. "I've touched on this subject publicly only briefly, but the truth remains that nearly all muggles who are aware of their superior, magical brethren are not tolerant, but heavy with jealousy and resentment… Non-magical siblings become dangerous in their envy. Parents who do not understand the capabilities of their sporadically magical children become malicious…"

The Dark Lord paused, allowing the hisses of disapproval to grow before continuing. His magic was glistening, so vibrant where it glinted that Harry hardly noticed anyone else's auras, though they were just as active.

Voldemort's focus fell back to Harry. "And so Albus Dumbledore, who was fully aware of all of this, left you there regardless. The most important magical child in Wizarding Brittan, as far as he was concerned, to be raised in a neglectful household by spiteful, prejudiced muggles… Why, Mr. Potter, do you believe he would do this?"

Harry opened his mouth to answer, but Voldemort decided to elaborate and interrupted before he could. "And you can skip the expected, ignorant response that it was for your protection. The very notion that living with Petunia Dursley and her family—who barely tolerated your presence, in a home which would have been easy for you to flee from, had you attempted it—offered you more protection than what the very best of the Wizarding World had to offer is *incredulous*. A better, safer household could have been provided for you… but Albus Dumbledore denied you this, preferring to leave you with muggles who detested what you were. Why do you think this was the case, Mr. Potter?"

Harry stared. His heart was beating too loudly. He barely heard his own voice when he responded, saying, "I… I don't know."

Voldemort *almost* smiled.

"Tell us about your relationship with Albus Dumbledore after you arrived at Hogwarts," he went on. Harry was still unable to tell why he was inquiring in the first place, but it was clear by the way his magic shined that, thus far, this was all going the way he intended it to.

"He was… nice to me," Harry said. "I liked him a lot, actually, right away. It was difficult not to. I'd only heard great things about him."

"From who?"

Harry's booming heartbeat stuttered. He was awash in a sudden, terrible wave of guilt. He had not even thought of him since…

"Rubeus Hagrid," he said, his voice breaking twice in two words.

What had become of Hagrid?

"The half-breed who had been employed at Hogwarts first as the Gamekeeper, and later as the Care of Magical Creatures professor?"

"Yes," Harry choked out, and how badly he wanted to ask, and yet how badly he did not want to know… "H-he came to get me when the Dursleys refused to give me my Hogwarts letter."

"They *refused* to give you your Hogwarts letter?"

Voldemort's tone was suddenly higher and colder. His magic swiftly darkened again, and it was so chilling that Harry shivered at the feel of it.

He hadn't known that.

For as informed as Voldemort seemed to be, it was abundantly clear—to Harry, to everyone—that this was something the Dark Lord had not known. He was blatantly perturbed.

Harry wasn't sure how to feel about this. His initial reaction was simple astonishment. Why, after everything he had just declared, did the Dark Lord find it shocking that his relatives had prevented him from reading his Hogwarts acceptance letter? Harry didn't know, but for whatever reason, Voldemort was genuinely surprised and enraged by this.

His magic was flashing. Frightening.

"Yes," Harry confirmed, adrenaline rushing through him.

"*Explain.*"

Harry felt his face turning red. This was a mortifying story to relay. "…When my letter came in the mail, well… No one ever wrote me, obviously, so my uncle was suspicious, and my aunt knew what it was at once. She threw it in the fire. Another one came the following morning, and she tossed that one too. It got out of hand really quickly. More and more letters came every day, to the point where they were

exploding out of our fireplace, our house was filled with them… it was like a snow globe of letters in our living room, but I *still* couldn't manage to get my hands on one. My uncle ended up dragging us all to this tiny island in the middle of a lake out in the country, even though there was a crazy storm going on, to get away from the owls…"

The crowd was aghast. Harry noted how stone-like Voldemort's face had once more become, despite his active magic.

"But then Hagrid came. Gave me my letter. And a birthday cake… right, because this was all happening the night before my birthday. The Dursleys never acknowledged mine… When my cousin tried to eat it, Hagrid gave him a pig's tail with his pink umbrella." Harry found himself smirking at the fond memory despite himself. "Best birthday I'd ever had."

There was some scattered laughter from the spectators, but the Dark Lord did not look amused in the slightest.

"So Albus Dumbledore sent an *incompetent half-breed* to rescue you from these hate-filled muggles, even when he must have known that things had escalated to such a level."

Harry scowled, heat rising to his face. "Hagrid wasn't—"

"I always said Dumbledore was off his rocker!"

A short, bald man whom Harry did not recognize from the Wizengamot stood, interrupting Harry with a booming shout. "I said he was inept years ago, when he first spoke out against my proposal for the Muggle Displacement Act—"

"That will do, Rowle," Voldemort said. The man fell silent, but he was glowering when he sat. The rest of the Wizengamot murmured in agreement with his outburst, and Harry comprehended fully just how much the High Court had changed.

Voldemort had not only placed himself as the Chief Warlock, but he had, evidently, replaced everyone he could on the Wizangamot with conservative, like-minded individuals… Many of whom had probably harbored personal vendettas against Albus Dumbledore when he was alive.

"Mr. Dawlish," Voldemort called suddenly, looking down at the guards that were on either side of the elevated bench where the Wizengamot sat. A man on the far left, whom Harry had not noticed before,

jumped as though he'd just been struck at the sound of his name.

Harry recognized this wizard. He was an auror, one who had been commanded by Minister Fudge to seize Dumbledore in his own office, years ago…

"Y-yes, my Lord?" he stuttered, quickly getting to his feet and facing the Dark Lord presiding. His magic was a deep blue-green, and it shuddered under Voldemort's scrutiny.

"As the current Head of the Auror Department, it is your solemn duty to track down and locate dangerous criminals. So, tell me… where *is* Rubeus Hagrid?"

Dawlish's statue shrunk. "W-we have been searching for Rubeus Hagrid as a high-priority rebel, but, er, as of this moment, we are unable to locate him…"

Harry was hit with a rush of relief so strong he felt dizzy. *Hagrid had gotten away…*

How on earth he had managed that, Harry could not even fathom. The last he had seen of Hagrid was on that crucial night in the forest, when he had been bound and silenced, forced to watch as Harry surrendered himself…

But if what Dawlish was saying was correct, he had somehow escaped.

"You are *unable to locate him,"* Voldemort sneered. "The entire auror department is incapable of finding an uneducated half-breed with no wand." He turned his attention back to the court when he went on, saying, "And to think, there are those in the Ministry who still think I am wrong in my wishes to revamp most departments."

Dawlish turned a bright red. The crowd chuckled at Voldemort's words, and Harry came to a sudden and chilling realization.

They weren't terrified of him anymore.

Well, no, that wasn't true—Harry was certain that every single person in the courtroom harbored a deep fear for Voldemort—but it was no longer the *only* feeling they had towards him. Just weeks ago, even those who were working within a Voldemort-run Ministry were afraid of the mere idea of him. He hadn't come out in the public eye, preferring instead to remain as a mysterious, omniscient entity in the shadows…

But that had all changed.

Now, Voldemort was *very* public, and he was holding trials and making humorous remarks and—

And people *liked* him.

Harry's jaw was dropping as he examined the crowd. Nearly all of them were smirking, nodding in agreement and casting the Dark Lord admiring glances. It reminded Harry viscerally of Slughorn's memory, when a sixteen-year-old Tom Riddle sat in his office, surrounded by his peers… In fact, except for Slughorn himself, whose eyes were fixed on the floor, and Draco Malfoy, who was clearly not as good an actor as his mother and father yet, everyone was looking at the Dark Lord with reverence. Their auras, for the most part, seemed to reflect these feelings, too.

Voldemort wasn't forcing them into following him solely out of fear anymore, Harry grasped. He was truly winning them over. With his words, with his ideals, with his charming, handsome face…

Harry felt sick at the comprehension. Lord Voldemort regaining a more human appearance was, perhaps, the most effective and dangerous thing he had done… and it was Harry's fault he had done it.

"That will be all, Dawlish," Voldemort finished. Dawlish sat, bowing his head and looking miserable.

Voldemort's eyes returned to Harry. "Hagrid was *fine*," Harry snarled before he could be asked another question, defiance burning in his chest.

The light atmosphere that Voldemort's words had cast was quickly gone. His eyes narrowed, and everyone fell silent. "…Was he?" Voldemort said, his voice detached once more. "Was he truly, adequately helpful? In a completely unbiased manner? Tell us, Harry, what did Rubeus Hagrid *do* when he came to retrieve you from the Dursley family?"

"Well, he cursed Dudley, so that was great—"

"With his illegal, fragmented wand, the pieces of which he kept in an umbrella and which was a hazard to use," Voldemort interrupted smoothly, and though his tone was level, his eyes flashed a brighter red. "He cursed your cousin, performing magic in front of muggles and

breaking several laws in the process. But please. Continue with this tale, Mr. Potter. Where did Rubeus Hagrid take you?"

Harry was outraged, and though he wanted to argue about the fact that Hagrid *should* have been allowed a wand, he found himself answering the question, anyway. "To Diagon Alley, obviously," he said. "To buy school supplies."

"And did he explain to you all which you needed to know about Hogwarts in order to prepare you for attending the school?"

Harry hesitated, thinking. The truth was that he recalled all too clearly how very *unprepared* he had been. "Er, no, not really," he admitted. "But—"

"What *did* he tell you?"

Harry bit his lower lip and he contemplated this. It felt like he was recalling someone else's adventure into Diagon Alley. "He… Well, he talked about how wonderful Hogwarts was, of course… That it was the greatest place on earth, especially under Albus Dumbledore… He talked a lot about Dumbledore, actually. Said he was Dumbledore's man, that there was nothing the Headmaster couldn't trust him to do… Er."

He felt like he was rambling, but the Wizengamot was listening with rapt attention, and Voldemort did not interrupt him. "He told me a bit about the houses," Harry continued, "about how he was in Gryffindor when he was a student, just like Dumbledore…"

"What else did he tell you concerning the houses of Hogwarts specifically?"

Voldemort's magic glinted in a way Harry was coming to recognize far too well. It was almost devious.

"He said… He said that Gryffindor was the best, that it was the house my parents had been sorted into as well," Harry answered. "He said that Ravenclaw was all right, that Hufflepuff was… well, it wasn't great, but it wasn't as bad as Slytherin…" He cleared his throat, hoping that he would be cut off. He wasn't. Voldemort was looking at him expectantly. "He said that Slytherin was the worst, that there wasn't a dark witch or wizard who hadn't come from that house."

Harry was surprised when Voldemort didn't comment on that. "Did Rubeus Hagrid continue to watch over you, from this point on? You

stated previously that this occurred on your birthday, which is July 31st. There was an entire month from then until the first of September. Were you still forced to spend the remainder of the summer holiday with the Dursley family?"

"Yes."

"Were plans set in motion to make sure that you would safely arrive at King's Cross in London on September first? Clearly, this was a family that would not willingly help you attend Hogwarts, as they had gone to such extremes to keep your letter from you."

"Er. No," Harry said, but it now seemed like that should have been discussed. "No, but, ah. They drove me to King's Cross… Though my uncle did say it was only because they were going to London anyway. My cousin had to have the pigtail removed by a surgeon… Unintentional planning on Hagrid's part?"

Harry wasn't sure why he couldn't stop himself from adding unnecessary thoughts as he had them. Was it just his extreme nervousness, or was he truly being influenced by veritaserum?

The Dark Lord's magic was dim, the opposite of amused. "Was your arrival at Hogwarts seamless, Mr. Potter?"

"…No, not at all," Harry admitted. "Hagrid… sort of forgot to tell me how to get on the platform. I had no idea where 9 ¾ was, that to get to it you had to pass through that section of wall… My aunt and uncle left me there, wandering around with my trunk and an owl… I asked a muggle guard where the train that left at eleven was, but he said there wasn't one, and I was too afraid to show him my ticket…"

There was some mumbling in the crowd that sounded suspiciously like it was sympathetic. Harry hated it, hated the idea that these people might be looking at him with pity.

"How did you eventually board the train?"

"I got lucky," Harry said. "I happened to hear Molly Weasley muttering something about the station being overrun with muggles, and turned and saw her and five children… Four of them were boys, and they had trunks and even an owl, too…"

Harry recalled it all so perfectly. Molly Weasley, arriving at King's Cross with less than ten minutes to go, rushing to get her children on the train…

Percy's magic brightened considerably as Harry recounted this memory, but he kept his face down, writing and recording his words. "Molly Weasley told me how to get onto the platform," Harry finished softly.

Voldemort was still, his glinting magic such a contrast to his cold expression. "And so this was your introduction, as an impressionable, eleven-year-old boy, to the wizarding world. Raised with neglectful muggles, no idea of who or what you were, and suddenly a giant of a man comes to rescue you, performing rudimentary, illegal magic on these relatives, whisking you away and telling you skewed, scattered, and ultimately frivolous information about the world in which you knew nothing. A man who told you of the greatness of a wizard who, as it transpired, knowingly damned you to that household, who told you of his preference of Gryffindor and who slandered the great house of Salazar Slytherin, who gave you very little *useful* information… leaving you to fend for yourself, to be rescued by the Weasley family."

A pause.

"All when he could have gone himself. Albus Dumbledore had been known to personally go and inform Muggle-born children of their abilities. At the very least, he could have sent an official to go in his stead. The Ministry has been coordinating with Hogwarts for years, producing trained representatives to go to the households of Muggle-born children to explain what Hogwarts was, and why their magically sporadic children should attend. And yet when it came to Harry Potter, he chose instead to send a *half-breed* who was banned from performing magic. Someone who was incredibly indebted to him, who was fiercely loyal to him… who would, of course, do nothing but sing his praises. Glorified words spoken to an oblivious, neglected boy, so that when he would finally escape the torment of his muggle family, he would first see Albus Dumbledore, seated in the middle of the glorious Great Hall of Hogwarts, in a very flattering—one might say *godlike*—light."

Harry stared, lips parted uselessly in shock. The crowd was buzzing.

"Mr. Potter, in hindsight, do you feel as though these circumstances caused you to arrive at Hogwarts with unfair prejudices?"

"Yes," Harry bit out unthinkingly.

"Do you believe such unjust biases affected your decisions upon your arrival at the school?"

Voldemort's magic was alight with eagerness. For the first time, Harry tried to lie. The fib was there in his mind, the word 'no' on the tip of his tongue—

And the question as to whether he had taken veritaserum was definitively answered.

He intended to deny it, but the word, "Yes," came spluttering out. As though to make matters worse, Harry instinctually clapped a hand over his mouth right afterwards, and the entirety of the court reacted. His own response was a dead giveaway.

Harry Potter had just tried and failed to lie.

The Dark Lord's aura was so glittery with satisfaction that Harry was nauseated perceiving it. "Give us an example," Voldemort demanded, face still betraying no emotion.

Harry clamped his eyes shut and tried to hold it in. Hadn't he heard once that some people could resist veritaserum if they practiced Occlumency? Harry bit down harshly on his lower lip, mentally chorusing the words *empty your mind…*

But Harry had never been good at Occlumency. He had no sooner attempted to clear his thoughts when the words burst out of his mouth, quite against his will. "At my sorting," he said in a rush. "My sorting was greatly affected by my pre-conceived notions of Hogwarts because of the conversations I had with Hagrid, as well as my initial friendship with Ronald Weasley, whose entire family was in Gryffindor house."

He couldn't stop. Harry suspected with dread that it was because he had attempted to lie—the effect of the veritaserum was obvious now, and he was powerless to stop speaking. The confessions spilled out of his mouth like water pouring from a broken faucet.

"Draco Malfoy confronted me and offered me his friendship, saying he could help me figure out the right sort of families to associate myself with in the wizarding world. I denied his offer because he had made fun of Ron Weasley, who was the first and only person I had considered even close to a friend at this time. Before the Sorting Hat had ever touched me, I knew I wanted no part of Slytherin house. But —"

Harry managed to pause for only a second, taking a short breath before the rest of the story came rushing out. "But then the Sorting

Hat was on my head, and it said I was difficult, very difficult, with an interesting thirst to prove myself, and I just thought, 'not Slytherin, not Slytherin', to which it seemed very surprised, telling me that it was all there, in my head, that Slytherin could help me on my way to greatness, no doubt, but I kept saying no, and finally it put me in Gryffindor. Reluctantly."

Harry took a deep breath afterwards, and even though he thought he was finished, he wasn't. He seemed unable to not voice his thoughts as he had them now, and it was with greatest humiliation that he found himself adding, "The Sorting Hat seemed to think I had bravery, loyalty, and ambition, but in hindsight, I don't think it ever considered Ravenclaw—evidently, it thought I had plenty of strong qualities, but *intelligence* wasn't *fucking* one of them—*fuck*."

Harry kept his eyes closed as he blushed furiously, his body far too hot with embarrassment. The crowd was reacting in a myriad of dramatic manners—some were gasping, some were muttering derisively, and some were laughing—probably because of that last bit Harry had added, unable to even stop himself from voicing aloud the internal swear words he was thinking.

He could stay silent now, at least. Harry sensed the magic around him, and the Dark Lord's was the most vibrant of them all. Tangled sensations like honest shock at Harry's confession, followed quickly by a gratification so powerful it was suffocating.

Harry finally opened his eyes, looking up at the Dark Lord as slowly as he dared. He couldn't be entirely sure, but Harry thought it looked like Voldemort was trying not to join those who had laughed. His mask of indifference appeared on the verge of cracking.

"Your experience at Hogwarts was extremely altered, then, by the influence of Albus Dumbledore… and this was all before he ever bothered to speak with you."

"Manipulative crook!"

The same, balding wizard who had shouted before was on his feet again. He slammed his fists down on the counter in front of him, seething. "I always said Dumbledore was an underhanded, scheming man! Why, when he sought to—"

"That will *do*, Rowle," Voldemort repeated, a bit sharper this time—and though his expression was one of mild annoyance, his magic danced with obvious approval.

Rowle fell back into his seat. The spectators were nodding, and a few even shouted quick words of agreement, but then the Dark Lord raised one hand, and silence fell.

"Mr. Potter," he said. "Tell us about your first conversation with Albus Dumbledore."

Harry's hesitation at this question was not from a desire to lie—he now knew how futile and potentially damaging such an act was—but from uncertainty. When *was* the first time he had spoken to Dumbledore? He furrowed his brows, thinking…

"It was not long after Christmas," he answered as it came to him. "I had just gotten my invisibility cloak as a surprise Christmas present, left for me without a note, though now I know it was from Dumbledore himself… So, naturally, I went out after hours—"

"Why?"

It was not the Dark Lord who had voiced the question. Harry bristled at the sound of Umbridge's high, sharp voice, her eyes fixed on him with utmost dislike. Her neon-like aura was putrid.

"Because I wanted to go to the Restricted Section of the library," Harry muttered, injecting as much venom into every syllable as he could.

"*Why?"*

"Irrelevant."

Voldemort cut Harry off before he could speak, shooting Umbridge a quick and icy look. Her face paled and her magic wilted, terror at being addressed personally by the Dark Lord in a disapproving manner evident in every feature. Harry felt a completely unwarranted rush of something like affection for him in that moment. "You were out of bed after hours under the guise of your invisibility cloak," Voldemort said, turning his attention back to Harry. "Continue."

"I went to the Restricted Section of the library," Harry said, casting Umbridge one last, scathing look, "and the very first book I opened screamed bloody murder. So I ran, barely escaping Filch and that awful cat of his, and—and I don't even know how I got there, but I stumbled upon this room that had the Mirror of Erised."

Harry paused, dreading what was assuredly going to be Voldemort's next question. He tried not to think of the nightmare he'd had, the one

in which he had seen not his family in the reflective surface of the mirror, but Lord Voldemort, snake-like and monstrous, his lips grazing his ear—

"And Albus Dumbledore found you?"

Harry seized on the question at once. "No," he said. "At least, not that time. I went back the next night, bringing Ron with me. Then I went again, a third time, by myself… and that was when Dumbledore found me."

Voldemort's aura was light and curious. "Was the then-Headmaster angry? Did he punish or otherwise reprimand you for being out after hours?"

"No, he wasn't mad at all… Just told me what the mirror did, that it showed you your heart's true desire. He seemed more concerned than anything. He warned me against coming back, because it was dangerous, and the mirror was going to be moved soon, anyway."

The Dark Lord's magic flickered like he was conflicted. He was quiet for a moment, but eventually decided to voice the question Harry wished he would not. "…What *did* you see in the mirror, Mr. Potter?"

"M-my family," Harry stuttered, both to his relief and discomfort. This was the last place in the world he wanted to talk about his family. "I saw my parents for the first time…"

"Your parents."

Voldemort's face and magic both became sinister. He addressed the courtroom at large when he spoke next. "James Potter and Lily Evans. A pure-blooded wizard, who ultimately revealed himself to be a blood-traitor, and a Muggle-born woman."

A long stretch of silence. Harry held his breath.

"Lily Evans, sister of the muggle woman Petunia Evans, who raised Harry Potter, was a mudblood who had somehow attracted the interest of both James Potter and Severus Snape," the Dark Lord went on. Several members of the Wizengamot scoffed disdainfully. "One wonders how such an undesirable individual could manipulate not just one, but two wizards with blood status into pursuing her… Horace Slughorn."

The Dark Lord's voice suddenly calling upon him caused Slughorn to

nearly fall out of his seat. He peered up at Voldemort, squinting, rather like he was being forced to look into a bright light. "Tell us… as the Potions Master in her day, how did Lily Evans perform as a student in your class?"

Slughorn was trembling when he stood, his eyes darting around to look at anyone else on the Wizengamot bench besides the Dark Lord. "She… she was magnificent," he said truthfully. "Lily Evans was easily one of my best students. Brilliant at Potions, really. She always got top marks. One of the few to receive an 'Outstanding' both in her O.W.L. and in her N.E.W.T."

"Then it would not be unreasonable to assume that Lily Evans was capable of creating the most complicated brews… such as amortentia."

Slughorn's face turned an unsettling shade of green. His magic was a heavy shroud of desolation as he realized what the Dark Lord was willing him to insinuate. But surely, Harry thought, Slughorn would *never* actually go along with it…

Harry was wrong.

"I… No, it would not be unreasonable to say that," Slughorn murmured, acquiescent. "Lily Evans would have been more than capable of brewing love potions."

"Thank you," Voldemort murmured, and Slughorn sat.

The anger that erupted in Harry's chest was sudden and fierce.

It consumed him so wholly that he forgot himself, forgot everything; he was on his feet so quickly he hardly registered that he'd stood before he was shouting, fists raised, blood boiling—

"*How could you?"*

Harry fleetingly caught Slughorn's stricken face and shifting magic, had taken two long, fast strides when the chains on the floor sprung to life. One caught him around each of his wrists and yanked him backwards.

Harry resisted, pulling against them, using every ounce of willpower he had to ignore the burning pain they caused and keep his focus on Slughorn. *"You—!"*

Before another word could leave his mouth, a third chain snapped

around his throat, viciously tight. It turned his accusation into a strangled cry, and in one viciously fast motion, the shackles pulled him back towards the chair. Harry's knees buckled and he was forced to sit. His skin burned, white-hot and horrible as the chains twisted around him, securing him so tightly to the chair that he could hardly breathe.

"Enough."

The bindings cooled and loosened but didn't completely relinquish their hold. Harry inhaled a shuddering breath, and afterwards began coughing. His eyes watered. His ears rang. Harry barely perceived the gasps and shifting movement of the crowd, nor their trembling magic.

The pain did little to sober his anger. Harry turned and glared at Slughorn.

You said she was one of your favorites. You said you adored her. You said she was charming and brilliant and good.

Harry could say none of these things, as a chain was still wrapped around his throat, but he thought them with as much vitriol as he could. Slughorn, who had been so adept at staring at nothing but the floor before, seemed trapped in Harry's glare. His magic was motionless and dark.

How could you?

"Mr. Potter."

Harry begrudgingly looked back to the Dark Lord. Voldemort waited a moment to lift his hand, and when he did, the chain around his neck went limp and fell to the floor. Harry's vision was blurred with the involuntary tears that had surfaced, but Voldemort's magic was crystal clear. It glistened strangely with something… something odd, something like…

Awe?

Harry didn't care to linger on it. "She'd never," he finally spat out, his voice gravelly and raw. The shackles on his wrists, which still ensnared him, burned slightly hotter. "She'd never use a love potion."

Voldemort's face was, as usual, meticulously void of emotion. "No one can make an accusation one way or the other, Mr. Potter. I was merely asking if such a thing were conceivable. After all, these kinds of

incidents generally go unreported, but that does not mean they are unheard-of phenomena… Ah, but you already knew that, *didn't you?"*

Harry felt the hot blood drain from his face. He was so stunned at those words and the manner in which Voldemort said them that his rage was eclipsed by shock. Voldemort's aura became thick with smugness, and Harry knew *exactly* what he was referring to.

Like mother, like son, I guess.

This was *revenge*.

"…Were you not once the intended target of a love potion yourself, Mr. Potter? While you were a student at Hogwarts, no less."

Voldemort folded his hands in front of him, continuing with his questions in a cool, level tone. His aura, however, was whirling with unbearable arrogance at how pale Harry had become.

It took Harry a moment to even consider what it was the Dark Lord was talking about. "I… yes," he finally answered.

Romilda Vane, and the chocolates she'd sent… Harry's sixth year at Hogwarts hardly felt real to him anymore. The members of the Wizengamot were whispering to each other behind their hands at his admission, nodding knowingly…

"But my mother would never have used a love potion!" he shouted. Voldemort's magic flashed when Harry spoke out of turn, and the whispering ceased. "She would *never* have done such a thing! My father loved her for who she was! She…"

Harry looked round the room, looking for someone, *anyone* to speak out on his behalf. His eyes landed on Narcissa, and he brightened with hope—*she* had known his mother, *she* knew that Lily Evans was not a manipulative witch, but kind and good and—

His hope died as quickly as it had come. Narcissa stared right into Harry's pleading eyes, and her navy magic became saturated in both understanding and deepest remorse. She said nothing, she did nothing. Narcissa looked away, irrefutable guilt in her aura.

In the same moment that Harry felt betrayed, he understood. Of course Narcissa Malfoy was not going to defend a Muggle-born woman in the Dark Lord's court room. Anything she did to oppose Voldemort could spell death for her, or, far more pressingly, her

family. Draco was sitting right next to her, her only son, and she would do anything to ensure his safety. Narcissa may have come to care for Harry, but she was not *his* mother.

Harry's mother was dead.

"You never knew your parents, Mr. Potter," Voldemort said calmly, as though Harry was not aware of this fact. He turned back to face him, scowling. "What are your sources for such a claim?"

"Sirius Black said as much, and Remus Lupin, his best friends—"

"A blood traitor and a werewolf, both of whom are now deceased," Voldemort cut in icily.

Harry's fury returned with a vengeance. The chains tightened on his wrists, but he ignored them and the pain they caused. "I saw it myself!" he roared. "In a memory, I saw it—for the longest time, my mother wasn't even interested in my father at all, *he* was the one who pursued *her*!"

"And whose memory was this?"

Harry's rage stuttered, unwilling to say the name out loud again.

But he didn't have a choice. The words were forming on his lips, and he could not stop them. "Severus Snape's," he said.

"And we arrive again at the man himself… *Severus Snape."*

Voldemort practically hissed the name. For the first time, the Dark Lord made *no* attempt to mask his emotions. Undiluted ire radiated about him, his magic blackening and swelling so intensely that Harry was sure everyone could feel it. The witches and wizards nearest to him cowered, shifting as far away from him as they could in their seats. Harry's fiery rage was quenched in a moment.

"The ultimate traitor," Voldemort continued, his quiet voice nonetheless carrying in the courtroom. "Severus Snape, who, as you stated previously, was responsible for the murder of Albus Dumbledore. Who, at the time, I presumed committed this act in order to gain further favor with me… I thought him loyal to *me*, then. Was he, Mr. Potter?"

"…No."

"No," Voldemort repeated with unconcealed fury. He addressed the Wizengamot, his eyes fiercely red. "No, Severus Snape was, at this point, working on Dumbledore's orders. Dumbledore had come into contact with a cursed item in the months leading up to that night on June 30th, 1997. He was already dying. He consorted with Snape, the turncloak, using his own, imminent demise to work towards his obsessive goal of destroying me. He ordered Snape to kill him… and Snape, still devastated over the death of the mudblood traitor whom I did not spare, also committed to seeing my demise, complied. It would seem no part of Dumbledore's life went untainted by his manipulative and destructive agenda… not even his death. Such a shame, that dead men cannot take the stand. How… *unfortunate*."

And it was clear by his tone that by *unfortunate* the Dark Lord meant *convenient*. Voldemort's eyes and magic flashed brilliantly, turning once more to Harry, who was shaken with disbelief. Everything he was saying was so *wrong*, and yet…

"Did you know, Mr. Potter," Voldemort went on, his tone suddenly much more conversational, "that memories rarely stand up in court?"

"N-no. I didn't know that."

Voldemort's lips curled slightly on one side, a crooked smile. "They do not. The reason for this is that memories are subjective. The manner in which we remember our pasts varies greatly based on time elapsed, perception, cognitive abilities, *willpower*… Yes, Mr. Potter, that is correct. Oftentimes, especially when powerful emotions are involved, we remember things the way we *wish* to remember them."

His tone was cruel and patronizing. Harry shook his head, refusing the implications. "No, Snape didn't make that up—she really *didn't* want my father at first, she—"

"Your words at this very moment are proof of the power of will. Right now, under the influence of a truth serum, you are able to vehemently argue that I am wrong, and you are right. Yet you cannot possibly know the truth on this matter. All of your beliefs have been based on what traitorous, biased men have told you, on subjectable *memories*…"

And Harry knew in that moment that Voldemort was referring not only to Snape's memories of his parents, but to Dumbledore's memories of him.

He knew.

Voldemort knew that Dumbledore had shared with Harry memories of Tom Riddle, memories gathered from Slughorn and house-elves and which had come from the former Headmaster himself…

But in the same second that Harry realized this, he thought of all the memories that *Voldemort* had shared with him.

A gift…

Were they *all* lies? Was *any* of it reliable information?

Harry's head was spinning. Voldemort's smirk was small but malevolent.

"You have been led to believe many inaccurate things about your family and the wizarding world, Mr. Potter… before you even understood what magic was, you had been manipulated into thinking that Dumbledore was an honorable and noble wizard, that the house of Salazar Slytherin was toxic, that your entire family was good and just… Your whole world had been constructed by ignorant muggles, mudbloods, blood traitors and half-breeds… the truth always being kept from you. Always *just* out of reach."

Harry opened his mouth, trying to come up with an intelligent retort, but he could not. Voldemort's magic was so bright where it glinted with gold that it was nearly blinding. "Have there been times where, in hindsight, you now realize that Albus Dumbledore purposefully kept information from you, Mr. Potter? Were there occasions where you had asked about your past, honest facts which you were entitled to, but that Albus Dumbledore denied you for his own manipulative purposes? The *truth* about your family, yourself… about *me*?"

Harry bit his tongue and tried uselessly to contain his response. He couldn't manage it for more than a second.

"Yes."

The sudden frazzled, energized magic of the spectators was disorienting, and their murmurings buzzed around Harry like a swarm of insects. Voldemort let it go one for a few moments, allowing them their hushed words of disdain for Dumbledore.

"Albus Dumbledore justified keeping critical information from an innocent child by telling himself that he was acting for *the greater good*… It was Dumbledore's greatest ambition to destroy my regime in his failure to recognize my superior ideals. He did everything in his

power to see my demise… to see to the fulfillment of a prophecy."

Harry felt like his heart turned to stone.

The stillness which followed was all-encompassing. Even the crowds' magic froze, fluctuating auras becoming motionless as they listened with rapt attention.

"Yes," Voldemort reiterated, who alone looked unfazed as he breached this dangerous and thrilling subject. "It is not a rumor, nor a falsity which was perpetuated by *The Daily Prophet*… but a reality. Tell us, Mr. Potter—did you know of this prophecy which concerned both of us?"

"I… yes," Harry responded. "But not until the end of my fifth year at Hogwarts."

"Did you hear this prophecy in its entirety?"

"Yes."

"Please… Tell us about it."

The tension in the room could not have gotten any higher. Harry's heart thundered, but the words were pulled from his lips, fear and anxiety nowhere near powerful enough to stifle the effect of the veritaserum.

"I… the prophecy… There was a prophecy. About you and… someone else, someone unnamed… who you took to mean me," Harry grit out, a truth which was vague only in that Harry wasn't quite sure what the Dark Lord wanted.

"Who made this prophecy?" Voldemort asked softly.

"Sibyl Trelawney."

"When?"

"Before I was born, I think. I don't know exactly when…"

"Where and under what circumstances was this prophecy made, to your knowledge?"

"Er… she made it when she was interviewing for a teaching position with Albus Dumbledore… for Divination. At a bar. The Hog's Head…"

"To Albus Dumbledore himself," Voldemort confirmed, and Harry nodded. Voldemort's magic was growing livelier by the second. "Was he the only one who heard the prophecy?"

"No."

"Who *else* heard the prophecy, Mr. Potter?"

"…Severus Snape."

"Severus Snape."

Voldemort said it with little less fury in his voice the third time. "Correct. It was Severus Snape who heard this prophecy. At the time, he was truly loyal to my cause, and came to tell me at once… Tell us, Mr. Potter… What did this prophecy say?"

Everyone was staring at him, their auras thick and oppressive in anticipation. Harry's mouth was far too dry, and there was a strange, acidic taste in the back of his throat. He felt like he might be sick.

"I-it said… that someone born in the end of July, to parents who had thrice defied him, would have the power to… vanquish the Dark Lord… that he would have power the Dark Lord knows not."

"…Was that all it said?"

"No." Harry all but whispered, looking down. "It said that the Dark Lord would mark his opponent as his equal… and that neither could live while the other survives."

Silence. It stretched on and on. Harry didn't dare to meet his eye.

"So it did." Voldemort's voice sliced through the quietness of the room like a blade. "We can see quite clearly now how irrelevant such prophecies are… but when this particular prophecy was made, Severus Snape only reported half of it to me. He did not inform me of the second, more pertinent, portion. He only told me of my supposed downfall, and consequently that of our regime, our mission, of all that we had been so close to accomplishing…

"Why he did this is painfully obvious now. Severus Snape was an intelligent man. Intelligent, but clearly influenced. He wanted the woman, Lily Potter *née Evans*, for his own. He sought to get rid of the other man, James Potter, as well as the unwanted son, in one fell swoop. He informed me of this prophecy only partially. Severus made

it sound to me as though both James Potter and the newborn child, a mere infant, were an intricate part of the potential downfall of our regime. He told me it was imperative for the future of our new order that the man and the child be eliminated. And yet… he *begged* me to spare the mudblood."

"But you killed her."

Harry looked up, and suddenly it was as though everyone else had vanished. There were no spectators, no Wizengamot.

It was just Harry Potter and the man who had ruined his life.

"You killed my mother and my father. You say it was Dumbledore who damned me to a life with the Dursley family, but it was *you*. *You* put stock in a prophecy. *You* murdered them in cold blood, and then you failed to murder *me*." Harry's breath hitched, and tears, hot and unwanted, welled in his eyes.

"Everything terrible that's happened to me is *your* fault."

Voldemort's magic became unreadably motionless and black, his eyes empty. Harry stared, his body shaking, hardly noticing the way the chains burned on his arms.

"…James Potter and Lily Evans were rebels and traitors," Voldemort said. "At the height of the first Wizarding War, I personally sought to recruit them for my regime in a peaceful manner… Yes, you heard me correctly. *Both* of them. I *am* capable of seeing beyond birth status. But they refused my offer, defying me for the first time. That act alone was punishable by death.

"They escaped the faithful Death Eaters I sent for them after this initial transgression. Unfortunate, but unsurprising. I would not have offered such individuals a place in my order if they did not have prodigious skills. James Potter was responsible for the murder of Gregory Greengrass, and Lily Evans irreparably maimed Alexander Burke… the *second* time they defied me."

Voldemort paused. Harry was overcome with the strangest feeling, like he had just been handed something solid and heavy. It weighed in his chest like a stone. It took him a moment to realize why this was the case, what it was precisely that had disturbed him so… and then the comprehension dawned on him.

It was the notion that his father had killed.

Why was such a thought so unsettling to him? It had been during a time of war; James Potter and his mother were being pursued by Death Eaters who were surely aiming to kill… His father was simply defending himself and the woman he loved. It was a reasonable act, killing someone who was trying to kill you. Necessary, even.

So why did Harry feel so empty?

The answer came to him a second later. It was because he, Harry, could never do that.

It wasn't that Harry thought himself better or kinder than anyone else; it was just a fact. Harry *had* been pursued by Death Eaters who'd aimed to kill him and his friends. He'd had killing curses shot at himself and those he cared about far too many times… But never once had Harry attempted to kill in response. Nothing could ever drive him to commit murder. Harry knew that, if it had ever come down to it— to he and Voldemort facing off, the Chosen One and the Dark Lord, with Harry *knowing* that Voldemort meant to kill him, and *knowing* that if he, Harry, were to fall, that Tom Riddle would go on to kill and kill again—

Harry still wouldn't do it.

Harry would *still* shout *'Expelliarmus!'* as his greatest hope to the heavens, he would *still* do whatever he could to make a broken wizard try for some remorse.

Harry was not sure how to feel about this insight. He was not sure if this inability to kill was a flaw or not. All he knew was that, for as much as people told him they looked alike… Harry was not like his father at all.

He felt numb.

"They later went on to join Albus Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix, openly opposing me," Voldemort continued. Harry's ears were ringing again, struggling to take in his words. "Three times, they defied me. Their deaths were warranted. It was for this reason that I did not hesitate to act on the prophecy which Severus Snape reported to me… albeit his slanted version of it. He was adamant that this prophecy meant none other than Harry James Potter, that he would be the destruction of our entire cause. He purposefully did not tell me the part of the prophecy which stated that I would mark the other as an equal, that he would have a power I knew not… Had he done so, I would have waited to see what this meant. But Severus Snape was

impatient, blinded by greed and lust. He made it seem as though the child had to be destroyed right away. I listened."

Harry was too stunned at how Voldemort was twisting the truth that he could do nothing but gape at him. That wasn't right; Snape hadn't told him the entirety of the prophecy because he hadn't *heard* it, and it was *Voldemort* who had decided it meant Harry, not him—and the moment Snape learned that Voldemort meant to kill the Potters, he told Dumbledore, he switched sides *then*…

But Voldemort kept speaking, and everyone in the courtroom was listening, drinking in every word. "Yet the Potters were under protection. Albus Dumbledore, having heard the prophecy in its entirety himself, divined who it meant. He informed the Potters of this prophetic message. At his suggestion, they were then hidden under the Fidelius Charm. The supposed Secret-Keeper was Sirius Black, but, as we all now know, this was a ruse. They chose instead to trust their lives to *Peter Pettigrew*… an untalented, unintelligent man, a rat in every sense of the word… a wizard who eventually came to work for me as a spy. He told me where the Potters were, and so I went. To rid the world of the rebellious blood-traitor and the supposed downfall of our regime, the last deaths necessary, or so I had been told, to mar what would soon be the uninterrupted rise of Britain's great magical community…"

Voldemort's face became stony, wrath lurking behind his blood red eyes. "…But even *that* had Dumbledore's manipulative hand in it. For what parents would prefer to place the safety of their only son with Peter Pettigrew, when they could have had Dumbledore himself be their Secret Keeper?"

Spectators were frowning, their magic whirling as they contemplated this. Harry was having a difficult time breathing.

"I have a theory on this matter," Voldemort continued smoothly, speaking more to the court now than Harry. "I believe the only sort of person who would willingly place the safety of their family in Pettigrew is one who was confounded. The most reasonable explanation is that Dumbledore implanted the idea in the Potters' minds in the first place. For Albus Dumbledore was a master Legilimens, he surely knew that Pettigrew was weak, a spy just waiting for the opportunity to win *my* favor. I propose that Dumbledore, while acting as though he was trying to protect the Potters, was actually doing everything in his power to make certain that I attacked them. He wanted to see the prophecy come into

fruition. He wanted me to mark a prophesized child as my equal, uncaring of the fact that this would surely spell the deaths of James and Lily Potter in the process. He would sacrifice any number of his own followers to help in the supposed progression of my future downfall. Tell us, Harry…"

Harry registered somewhere on the periphery of his mind that the Dark Lord had, perhaps unintentionally, called him by his first name. He looked up, feeling dazed.

"…For all your previous, misplaced feelings towards the man, do you believe Albus Dumbledore to be the sort who would willingly let his own followers—those who trusted him completely, who proclaimed to be his men, through and through… Do you think he would sacrifice them if it meant seeing me fall?"

If he had been asked this question just a month ago, Harry would have said no. He would have undoubtedly proclaimed that Dumbledore would never, ever do that, that the former Headmaster would sooner die himself than watch his own followers perish.

'*You have used me… I have spied for you and lied for you, put myself in mortal danger for you. Everything was supposed to keep Lily Potter's son safe. Now you tell me you have been raising him like a pig for slaughter…*'

Snape's words echoed in Harry's mind like a ghost speaking in his ear. His eyes were watering again. Why were his eyes watering?

"Yes," he answered. His voice sounded like someone else's.

If Voldemort was affected by Harry's emotion, his face did not show it. The Dark Lord's magic was glinting brightly again, but Harry couldn't tell what it meant. He hardly had the wherewithal to focus at all.

"Albus Dumbledore was a terrible man," Voldemort declared. "I suspect that he knew exactly what Pettigrew was, just as he surely knew that Sirius Black was innocent of Pettigrew's murder. Another monstrous crime, to add to the long list of atrocities performed by Dumbledore."

Harry's heavy heart leapt in his throat at the mention of his godfather. Was Voldemort going to ruin *his* memory with some convoluted version of the truth, too?

"Dumbledore knew Sirius Black was innocent of that particular crime, yet did nothing to prevent him from being thrown into Azkaban

without a trial. For his own purposes, of course. He preferred Harry Potter to be raised in a neglectful household so that he would arrive at Hogwarts a desperate, ignorant child; one he could easily manipulate and control. But it *is* fascinating to think of, isn't it? In a world largely influenced by Albus Dumbledore, witches and wizards were wrongly placed in Azkaban without so much as a hearing in their defense. And yet under my rule, my supposed, greatest threat sits before you, having a just and fair trial."

The spectators murmured approvingly, their auras once more glistening with reverence. Voldemort's own magic was dancing at their admiring looks.

"Ah, forgive me," he said after a moment, shaking his head and looking shockingly human. "I have allowed my own ire towards a man who no longer lives to distract me. I was in the middle of a very critical story.

"As you all know, I fell for this most complicated of ploys. I went to the Potter household with every intention to end the war with what I believed would be the last death. I confess, I did not look forward to it. But what was one death, I thought, to prevent the slaughter of thousands more? He was the son of a blood-traitor and a mudblood. If killing him would mean *saving* my people—unlike Dumbledore, I do *not* reward faith with sacrifice and death—then it had to be done. I ended the lives of James and Lily Potter quickly—merciful, painless deaths. Then I attempted to do the same with their son… Harry James Potter."

His red eyes brightened as they bored into Harry's. Harry wondered if he was reliving that moment right now. Was he recalling what Harry looked like as an infant? A baby with bright eyes, vibrant and green?

"…And was then struck with my own curse. Prophecies exist as only poetic explanations. As it transpired, the 'power which the Dark Lord knows not'—the supposed 'power' of Harry Potter which has been whispered about for years…was *my* power. The mudblood, as well as James Potter, died protecting their son, instilling a powerful protective enchantment around the boy. A mere deflective shield, but one which I did not foresee, as I did not know the entirety of the prophecy to begin with… an ancient magic I overlooked… My own curse rebounded on me, nearly killing me in the process. Harry Potter was 'marked'… but not as my *equal*. Not as my prophesied downfall, no…"

The Dark Lord's face was bloodless and white.

"…merely as a victim."

More muttering, the loudest it had been yet, filled the room. Harry's pulse was loud in his ears.

"Mr. Potter," Voldemort said, and all were silent again at once. "Do you confess that you feel as though you've been manipulated into believing falsities about your life and your family from an early age, largely due to the words and manipulations of Albus Dumbledore?"

Harry swallowed thickly. "Yes," he answered, because that was the truth.

"Do you renounce your former, misguided beliefs on the treatment and standardization of muggle-borns and blood treachery? Do you renounce your former, misguided support of Albus Dumbledore and his rebellious forces, should they continue to attempt to de-stabilize the current regime of the Ministry of Magic? Before you answer, Mr. Potter…"

Voldemort leaned forward, his magic gleaming vivaciously. "I advise you to think carefully on this matter. We all know that whatever response leaves your mouth, that you will be saying it with honest intent. Consider all which your answer may mean… and all which you have to lose."

The air in the courtroom felt like it was electrically charged as everyone waited for him to answer. Harry's mind was buzzing, and though the Dark Lord's words were vague enough to be spoken in front of so many people, Harry knew what he meant.

Consider that I have your friends' lives in my hands. Consider what, if you refuse to submit to me here and now, I will do to them… what I will do to you.

When Harry envisioned Ron and Hermione, stuck in Malfoy Manor, he knew there was only one truthful answer he could give.

He would do anything for them.

"Yes," he whispered. "I… I renounce everything."

"Do you, Harry James Potter, pledge your unwavering allegiance to the judicious might of the Ministry of Magic?"

Everyone was craning their necks, the tension in the room was paramount—Harry ignored all of it, thinking only of his friends and how he did not have a choice—

"Yes."

Voldemort's magic was a cascade of gilded sparks, so bright they made Harry think of fireworks. He turned and addressed the Wizengamot with his next words. "All those in favor of pardoning the accused, Harry Potter, on the grounds that he had been unfairly coerced, manipulated, and victimized by Albus Dumbledore?"

"*Cleared of all charges?"*

Umbridge looked aghast, her bright, yellow magic lighting up around her. "Victimized or not, my Lord, there must be *some* punishment! All of the Weasley boys who were accused of similar crimes were at least given sentences!"

A few of the other witches and wizards looked like they might be about to murmur agreements, but Voldemort silenced them before they could speak. "The major difference in these cases being that Ronald, Fred, and George Weasley all grew up in pureblood, wizarding households. Their choices were informed, intentional, and, therefore, far more grievous. To look at these cases from the same perspective would be irrational. The days of treating every criminal indiscretion with similar disregard are *over*, Umbridge."

Harry couldn't believe it. Umbridge was gawking, mouth opening and closing like a dumbstruck fish, clearly torn between her fear of Voldemort and hatred towards Harry. She ultimately settled on nodding in submission, and Harry realized…

Voldemort was actually going to pull this off.

"Though if most of the Wizengamot agrees with you, then we shall, of course, determine a fair sentence… but first." Voldemort looked as though he could care less about the results on the surface, but his magic trembled with an uncharacteristic nervousness. "All in favor of pardoning the accused?"

Slowly, a few arms rose in the air… Then a few more…

It wasn't all of them, but it was quickly clear that over half were voting in Harry's favor. The majority of the Wizengamot, even. Only Umbridge and a few others kept their arms at their sides.

Voldemort turned and looked back to Harry, the same triumphant cascade like fireworks lighting up around him. Harry might have thought it beautiful if he were capable of thinking clearly.

"Of course, there is the issue of rehabilitation."

Harry blinked in surprise. Voldemort elaborated in a sly tone. "Being forgiven for past transgressions is one matter, but with this ruling, we are also recognizing that you have been victimized for nearly your entire life, Mr. Potter. Some structure would be… ideal. I propose a temporary living arrangement, that you stay with a respected, pureblood family who can educate you properly on the wizarding world."

Before Harry could react, someone else stood, clearing his throat and drawing everyone's attention. "My Lord," Lucius Malfoy said. He spoke with great confidence, and Harry could tell at once that this was planned. "My family would be honored to take Mr. Potter into our home and attend to this matter. Our son did, after all, initially offer his guidance to him years ago, but alas, he had already been influenced by Dumbledore… Allow us to right this wrong."

Narcissa nodded, and Draco forced a grin that looked so painful that even Harry's jaw hurt. Voldemort smirked. "Very w—"

"My family can do it."

Everyone looked in shock to Percy Weasley.

Having set his writing aside, Percy was now on his feet, his magic fiery and bold. He glanced at Harry before he turned and addressed Voldemort directly. "The Weasley's have been like a family to Harry Potter since the moment they helped him at King's Cross, he even said so himself. My brothers have risked their personal safety on more than one occasion to free him from his horrible, muggle family; he has been staying for as long as Dumbledore would allow at our home at every opportunity. My parents look at him as another son. During such a traumatic and stressful time, Harry should be allowed to stay in a place where he feels safe, with people he trusts."

Voldemort's smile was gone, and his magic frightening. Lucius scoffed loudly, once more drawing everyone's eyes to him. "*Your* family? You think that a household which has produced three rebellious children a suitable place for Mr. Potter to learn proper wizarding protocol?"

"'*All pureblood families who have sworn allegiance to our Lord, even those*

previously seen as traitorous, must be pardoned for their transgressions and looked upon with equal favor," Percy said defiantly. "Your words from the address you gave just two days ago, Lucius Malfoy. My family has sworn fealty to the new regime. According to you, my family is *equally* as honorable as yours."

Narcissa paled, grasping her husband's forearm as her magic flashed in alarm. Lucius's face flushed and he floundered at the unexpected opposition. "To—I didn't—that doesn't mean—"

Percy turned his back to him and addressed Voldemort again. *"'We must grant them opportunity to prove themselves loyal in this new era, where magical unity is paramount,*" he said, and Voldemort's magic darkened tremendously.

"*Your* words, my Lord."

Harry was stunned. Percy Weasley was standing up bravely to Lord Voldemort… and it seemed he was going to win. "I beseech you, my Lord. Allow the Weasley family to prove their loyalty to you by housing Harry Potter. There is no family alive who cares for him more."

And what could Voldemort possibly say in argument of that?

Harry felt suddenly so light he thought he might float, regardless of the chains which still bound him to the chair. To go and live at the Burrow… Harry couldn't even think of what that would mean for Hermione and Ron just then. If Percy succeeded, this would mean seeing Molly and Arthur Weasley again, it would mean staying in the same household as—

"Harry Potter shall be staying with the Malfoy family until he is deemed fit for independence," Voldemort hissed, his voice laced with such a cold rage that Harry's skin broke out into goosebumps. The hope that had inflated in his chest popped like a balloon. "My decision on this matter is *final*."

…And that, it seemed, was that. Percy's magic swiftly dwindled, filled with disappointment.

Voldemort raised one hand in Harry's direction. The shackles on his wrists went limp, releasing him and falling to the floor at his sides.

"Harry James Potter…"

The Dark Lord's bloodless face was once more diplomatically composed, but his eyes were practically on fire as they looked down at Harry, his magic glistening evocatively.

Voldemort, as always, simultaneously terrified and enthralled him.

"…cleared of all charges."

Chapter End Notes

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Never Again

Voldemort stood, and the rest of the Wizengamot followed.

It was like someone had pressed play on a paused television program. Spectators began to rise after the Dark Lord, speaking to each other in excited voices over what they had just witnessed.

The Dark Lord, for his part, had already turned his back to Harry. He became engrossed in conversation with several of the older wizards of the Wizengamot, like he had forgotten Harry Potter so quickly, as though the Boy Who Lived was no longer worth his time.

One of the guards approached Harry, reaching into his robes and pulling out a small phial filled with amber liquid. "Here, Potter," he said, handing it to him. He frowned when Harry didn't immediately take it. "It's the antidote to the veritaserum you took. Your trial is over. You are no longer required to be under the influence of a truth serum… Unless you *want* to go spluttering out confessions to anyone who asks for the next ten to twelve hours."

That statement garnered the reaction he'd been hoping for. Harry stood and snatched the phial. He had just uncorked it, was about to swallow it down, when he paused.

He knew it was a stupid thing to do even as he moved to do it, but then again, such realizations had never stopped Harry from acting before. Harry marched to the side and intercepted Slughorn before the old man could escape, as he had been making his way towards the door in the back. Harry gripped his shoulder, forcing him to turn and face him.

Slughorn's muscles tensed and his magic trembled, but Harry wasn't letting him flee. He held his robes tightly in one hand and the glass phial in the other. Harry noted the way his former potions professor glanced at it, and he was certain that Slughorn knew it was the antidote for veritaserum.

A few people were turning to watch what he was doing, pointing and murmuring, but Harry ignored them. He held Slughorn's gaze and gave him a look of deepest loathing. "You are a pathetic excuse of a man," Harry murmured quietly enough so that only Slughorn could hear him.

"And you *disgust* me."

Harry lifted the phial to his lips and drank it in one gulp. He never took his eyes off Slughorn's as he did, whose face went ashen and whose magic wilted in shame.

Harry didn't give him a chance to respond. He dropped the phial, letting the glass shatter at Slughorn's feet before he turned and left him standing there, spectators staring and whispering.

Harry only managed to take a few steps before he was stopped again.

"Harry."

Percy.

He pulled Harry in to an embrace. Harry's anger towards Slughorn was immediately forgotten, and as he hugged Percy back a different variety of emotion bubbled in his chest.

Harry thought he might prefer the anger.

"I'm sorry," Percy whispered into his ear. His aura was thick with guilt. "I'm so sorry…"

Voldemort may have been feigning negligence, but Harry noticed him, then. His magic swelled in annoyance, black and horrendous.

Harry was astounded. The Dark Lord was *looking the other way*, smiling and nodding and *talking to other people*, and yet it was perfectly clear—to Harry, at least—that he knew Percy was hugging him… and it enraged him.

Harry stepped away. "Don't apologize," he said in a choked voice. "Thank you, that was… you were really…"

Harry couldn't think of words great enough to convey how he felt. Percy smiled knowingly.

"Mr. Potter."

It was Narcissa who beckoned to Harry next. Harry turned, a bit surprised that she had called him 'Mr. Potter' before he remembered where they were, what roles they were all playing while out in public.

Everyone at the Ministry of Magic was wearing their *finest* masks.

Narcissa gave Percy a fleeting smile that was anything but kind, yet when she looked at Harry, her eyes softened and her magic warmed. "Come along," she said. "Draco is going to take you straight to our manor. My husband and I will remain to deal with the press."

Harry felt his stomach drop. Of course, to leave the Ministry, they would have to go back up the stairs, up the lift, and through the atrium… Where hundreds of people would be waiting, including reporters with cameras and quick-quills, eager to hear of what the *Undesirable's* verdict was…

Narcissa squeezed his hand reassuringly. She had just begun to pull him away when Percy grabbed Harry's other arm and stopped him. Percy's magic was bold again, and he fixed Harry with a meaningful look.

"I'll give her your very best for you," he said.

And Harry knew that he was not speaking about Molly Weasley.

Harry's mouth went dry. Before he could even attempt to come up with a response, Narcissa was pulling him away. Percy released his shoulder and let him go.

The spectators gave the Malfoy family and Harry Potter a wide berth when they made their exit, two guards accompanying them on either side. Lucius went first, striding through the courtroom like the Ministry and all those present were lucky to have him there, and Harry was mildly impressed to see that Narcissa did the same. She released Harry's hand to walk alongside her husband, head held high and haughtiness etched into her every feature.

Which left Harry to fall into step with Draco directly behind them. They caught each other's eye for a second and then both looked away. Harry wondered what he was thinking. Draco's magic was unsettled and agitated, making Harry believe that he was nearly as desperate to escape this place as he was.

They took the first lift up, and it was such an absurd situation that Harry felt like he was in a dream. No one spoke. The guards stood like statues near the elevator's golden door. Lucius was staring at the ceiling with his brows furrowed. Narcissa gave Harry another fleeting smile, and Draco was trying and failing to look as unaffected as his father.

"Level eight, Atrium," the cool, female voice announced. The doors to

the lift opened, and Harry's senses were assaulted.

Camera flashes, shouting voices, and a plethora of magic.

The guards went out first, brandishing their wands and being much fiercer towards the spectators this time around. "Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy are being escorted to the Floo by myself and Nott," he said, nodding towards another guard. "Stay out of our way as we cross the atrium. We *have* been given permission from the Minister to use Unforgivables."

His threat had a profound affect. Harry wondered where the surely still Imperiused Minister Thicknesse was. He hadn't seen him in the courtroom.

"Any questions regarding the trial may be directed towards my wife and I," Lucius declared. He stood proud and tall, Narcissa next to him, and Harry had to admit—they did look like a formidable, powerful couple.

"Come on, you two."

The other guard—Nott—motioned for Draco and Harry to follow him. The witches and wizards gave them room to pass, their eyes fixated on them as they made the journey across the atrium.

Harry did his best not to look at any of them as they went. He wondered why Voldemort would be granting him this kindness, allowing him to leave afterwards with a guard and not be accosted by the press.

He came up with the answer almost at once. Of *course* Voldemort would not let him talk freely to anyone working for the *Prophet;* he probably assumed that Harry would say something stupid and reckless and screw everything up.

Well, he isn't wrong, Harry mused. He was suddenly glad that he'd run into Rita Skeeter on the way in.

"Here you are."

They'd finally arrived at the wall lined with fireplaces. Nott grabbed some floo powder from a shelf and tossed it onto the hearth. "Malfoy Manor," he said firmly.

Draco cast him a scathing look as the enchanted fire erupted in green.

"I could have done that myself," he muttered. He then pushed past the guards and disappeared into the flames, not even offering to let Harry through first.

Nott glared at the space where Draco had just vanished before glancing at Harry, as if to ask if *he* had a problem with him doing his job. When Harry didn't say anything, he tossed more powder into the fireplace and once more shouted, "Malfoy Manor!"

Harry took a deep breath and stepped into the green fire. Everything blurred and whirled around him, and though Harry was glad to leave the Ministry of Magic behind, he dreaded where he was going next.

His new *home*.

Harry's feet hit the ground, and the Manor came into view.

"Harry!"

He'd only taken one step into the foyer before Hermione had her arms around his midsection, her bushy hair in his face. Her velvety magic coiled over him, oddly pleasant with her emotional relief.

"What happened?" Ron asked. Hermione relinquished her death grip on him. "What did he say, what's your sentence?"

"I was just about to tell you—"

"Shut up Malfoy, I want to hear it from Harry," Ron snapped, and Draco crossed his arms indignantly. "Are we, uh, going to be doing time with Umbridge together?" Ron smiled; there was no humor in it.

"No," Harry said. "No, no Umbridge for me…"

Ron frowned. "Well, what, then?"

Harry opened his mouth but found he couldn't speak. He'd just noticed how similar Ron's magic was to Percy's.

"…Cleared of all charges!" Draco blurted out when Harry took too long. Ron and Hermione stared at him. "Yeah, you heard me," he went on, and Harry couldn't tell if he was upset about this verdict or not. "Harry Potter was deemed innocent on all accounts. By the Dark Lord himself!"

"*How?"* Hermione asked sharply.

"He blamed all of his crimes on Dumbledore and Snape, basically," Draco said.

"Dumbledore and *Snape*? But… *How*?" Hermione repeated. "How on earth could he possibly have done that and—and sounded logical? This was with the entire Wizengamot present, wasn't it?"

"Yes. And, er…"

Draco furrowed his brows, then looked to Harry as though requesting help. Harry could only shake his head his head. He didn't know how to begin explaining what had just happened.

"You… sort of had to be there," Draco finished in a mumble.

Ron was dumbfounded. "You've seriously been cleared of all charges? No… no lifetime of servitude to the Ministry of Magic or anything like that?" Harry shook his head. "Blimey, Harry… You're free!"

Malfoy scoffed. "No one is *free* here, Weasley, don't be an idiot. Potter has to stay at our Manor for *rehabilitative* purposes. He's not going anywhere, and neither are you, and neither is she." He glanced at the three of them, his expression souring. "Lucky me."

"I can't believe that he didn't take advantage of this, though," Hermione said, ignoring Draco's contemptuous drawl and looking at Harry. "Why wouldn't he want to claim you were guilty…? And *how* on earth did he make it seem plausible that you weren't?"

"You have no idea what the Dark Lord is capable of," Draco said. "Though I suppose you will be learning much more about that."

His eyes flickered down to Hermione's forearm, and Harry was surprised that there had been no ire in his voice. His light magic settled with something like pity.

"What exactly did he say? What questions did he ask?" Hermione said, shifting so her arm was behind her, away from his gaze. "I'd ask your mother, if she were here. Why *isn't* she here?"

"She and my father stayed at the Ministry to deal with the reporters," Draco said. "So it was up to me to come back with Potter."

"Why you?" said Ron. "I'd prefer your mother, honestly. Not that I'm fond of any Malfoy, mind you, but at least she's nice now."

"Because I get *all* the fun jobs!" Draco was suddenly shouting, throwing his arms out on either side of his body like he'd reached his wit's end. "I *really* do. Kill Dumbledore, Draco! Entertain your crazy aunt with violent tendencies while she can't leave the manor, Draco! Be a courteous host to the no-longer golden trio, Draco! Bloody *brilliant*."

"Quit being so dramatic," Hermione said. "Having to deal with us is hardly the worst task you could have."

"You think so, Granger? Dealing with just these two was a nightmare! I had to make something as simple as eating a damn cracker into some chivalrous, noble deed to get them to cooperate... Fucking Gryffindors."

He scoffed again. Hermione shook her head and ignored his outburst. "Tell us what happened at the Ministry," she said, looking back and forth between Harry and Draco. "I want to hear what happened from people who were there, not read some reporter's rendition of it in *The Daily Prophet*."

Harry tried once more to speak, but was still unable. His mind was reeling, and his mouth still felt weirdly dry.

I'll give her your very best for you.

"Er… well. They gave him veritaserum, first," Draco started uneasily once it was clear that Harry was not going to answer. "Oh, and made him cast a patronus to prove that it was him. He sent it charging right at Umbridge, which was pretty funny—"

"Did you really?" Ron interrupted. Harry nodded numbly. "That's hil —"

Hermione shushed him. "Then what happened, Malfoy?" she asked.

"Clearing him of the accusation about killing Dumbledore was easy, because he didn't do that," Draco continued, "and then… well—"

Draco's explanation was cut short. Hermione inhaled sharply and clutched at her arm, her magic shaking and a look of terror flashing across her face.

"What is—what—" Hermione yanked the sleeve of her robes up. The Dark Mark was bold and foreboding, and as Harry stared, he could feel a sinister energy radiating about it—black, just like Voldemort's

magic, but with none of the glimmers of gold.

"You're being summoned," Draco said.

"S-summoned?" Hermione's voice was high with fright. "B-but how—I don't know—"

"Stop freaking out and pay attention," Draco said, his tone impressively composed. "You should be able to tell where to go, what he wants. Instant information. Can you feel it?"

Hermione took a deep breath. Her eyes went slightly out of focus, her gaze went somewhere over Draco's head. "…I… Yes," she murmured. "I-I can, he… He wants me to come to the Ministry, now…"

She shook her head and looked at Draco again with lucidity. "How does that work?" she asked breathlessly. "Messages being transmitted like that, through a Mark? It was like the information was just—just there!"

Her eyes were shining with curiosity, like she was so intrigued by this brand of magic that she had momentarily forgotten why she was asking these questions in the first place. "I don't know, Granger! I don't know how the Dark Lord does much of anything, just that he *does*—and when he summons you, you go." He jabbed his finger towards the fireplace.

Hermione paled again, the light in her eyes gone. "R…right…"

"You're not going there alone," Ron said, standing tall. "I'm going with you—"

"Don't be such a moron, Weasley—"

"No," Hermione said, cutting Draco off. "No, he's… He's supposed to come with me."

"I… really?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes… You and I are supposed to go to the Ministry of Magic, together. Second level. Now."

They all stared at Ron. Something like comprehension flickered in his eyes, and Ron's face turned red. "I-is that right?" he asked weakly.

"Ron, *why* is the Dark Lord summoning the two of us to the Ministry of Magic?"

Ron's blush deepened. "I h-have no idea—"

"You're stuttering and your ears are turning red, that always happens when you're trying to keep something a secret," Hermione said.

"That's not t-true," Ron stuttered, turning redder still.

"Ron, what have you not been telling us?"

Harry was equally curious, as was Draco—evidently, this was something that he did not know about, either. Ron glanced at the three of them, his magic vibrating in a flustered way. "I don't—I mean, I *couldn't*—"

Before he could attempt to explain further, Hermione let out a shrill cry that bordered on a scream, grasping her forearm again. At the very same moment, Harry felt a stinging pain shoot across his scar, the irrefutable emotion of anger accompanying it. His hand flew to his forehead.

"Wh-what—" Hermione began, looking panicked.

"It's because you're hesitating!" Draco shouted. "You've been summoned, and he knows that you're here, that you have no excuse for making him wait!"

"He's pissed," Harry added unhelpfully as he lowered his hand. The pain in his scar had diminished, but Hermione's magic and expression indicated that her arm still burned.

"Even scarhead gets it," Draco muttered before refocusing on Hermione. "If you and Weasley are supposed to go to the Ministry of Magic, now, then *go*. The pain will only get worse the longer you make him wait, trust me."

Hermione did not need to be told again. She nodded, reaching for Ron's hand. Ron cast Harry a look that he could only interpret as pleading before she pulled him towards the fireplace.

It must have been horrible, the pain which the Dark Mark caused when Voldemort was unhappy. Hermione's magic was still whirling in discomfort, and she moved quickly, clearly desperate to get the burning to stop. Her right arm was shaking as she reached for the Floo Powder, but Ron stopped her and grabbed it instead. He cleared his throat and tossed some into the fireplace.

"The Ministry of Magic," he said, and the flames turned green. Hermione stepped into the fire and vanished. Ron repeated the action after she was gone, and shot Harry one last, nervous look as the emerald fire erupted once more. "See you soon, I hope," he said. He was gone before Harry could nod in response.

The fire and Ron both disappeared… leaving Harry and Draco alone.

An uncomfortable silence settled between them. Harry felt numb, if also a bit queasy. It was almost as if his mind had shut off. He knew he *should* have been feeling a plethora of emotions—anxiety for his friends, who had just gone off to meet Voldemort face to face at the Ministry; curiosity as to *why* this was the case and why Ron had been acting in such a strange manner; and angry, Harry *definitely* should have been feeling angry at how his trial had gone, at everything the Dark Lord had said…

But he didn't. Harry didn't feel much at all. He stared vacantly at the fireplace, a dull buzzing ringing in his ears.

"Er…" Draco scratched the back of his head. Harry looked at him, reality threatening to crash over him. Draco was there, had witnessed everything that happened… He had listened to every deceptive word the Dark Lord had said, had heard him speak about Harry's home life and past and *his mother*…

Suddenly, he could not stand to be anywhere near Draco Malfoy.

Harry turned and headed towards the staircase. "What—Hey! Where do you think you're going, Potter?" Draco shouted.

"My room, I guess," Harry said, shrugging as he went.

"*Your* room?"

"Yeah. I live here now, remember?" He kept walking.

"Just—just don't even think about leaving the manor, all right? I'll know if you try! There's wards and—"

"Malfoy, do you honestly think I'm going anywhere?" Harry stopped to face him. His monotonous voice and lack of retaliation perturbed Draco; it was obvious in his face and in his magic. "My two best friends just went off to go meet the Dark Lord. Do you think I would do anything to risk their safety?"

Draco was quiet for a moment, his aura trembling as he thought. Harry was just about to walk away from him again when he spoke.

"You saved me," he said quietly. Harry raised a brow at him. "In the Room of Hidden Things. Weasley was right. I remember him screaming at you not to come back for Goyle and me, but you did. You risked their safety, then."

Harry wasn't sure what to make of the way Draco's magic shimmered around him. It was thick and heavy, like a vapory mist draped over his shoulders.

He also found that he didn't much care. "Yeah, well. I always was a bit of an idiot," he said tonelessly. He turned and walked away before Draco could react to his sullenness, and this time, Draco did not call after him or stop him from going.

Harry went up the stairs and through the manor halls, his feet somehow knowing where to take him. He'd only made the journey across the massive home from his room to the foyer a few times, but he recognized painted portraits and crystal wall sconces, and knew he was going the right way.

He stopped when he came to the bay windows which looked over the gardens. Harry's heart ached at the sight. The sun was shining, the grass was a luscious green, and the sky, the sky was so blue…

How long had it been since he'd been outside? Harry thought furiously for a moment before it came to him—the last time he recalled being outdoors was when he'd gone out into the Forbidden Forest, the ghosts of his loved ones at his side, accompanying him to death…

Harry forced the coiling emotions that threatened to consume him away. He didn't want to confront them right now. He didn't want to think of anything.

He kept walking.

Harry finally arrived at his room. It was clean, the bed made so pristinely it looked as though it had never been touched before. Why he had come here, he wasn't quite sure. He wasn't tired. He supposed it was as good a place as any, so long as it was away from Malfoy…

Then Harry noticed the door which led to the bathroom, and knew exactly what he wanted. He went in, closing the door behind him and quickly stripping out of his clothes. He avoided looking in the mirror.

A shower sounded *glorious*.

Harry turned the water on and stepped into the marble basin, sighing when the water streamed down his bare chest. He let it run through his hair and over his back, and even though the water was hot, he realized that it was nowhere near hot enough. Harry turned up the heat as high as it would go. It was almost scalding, filling the bathroom with steam. It didn't bother him; in fact, Harry welcomed the burning sensation. It kept his attention, making it easier not to think about anything other than the discomfort it caused.

Harry didn't know how long he stood in the hot stream of water, scrubbing at his skin and hair with soap like maybe he could cleanse himself of everything that had gone wrong, like he could wash away a lifetime of mistakes and emerge from this shower as someone else.

He eventually turned the water off. His skin was red and raw when he stepped out of the tub, the air thick and damp. The mirror was completely covered in moisture.

Harry grabbed a towel and dried off, only then realizing how much he may have overdone it. His skin was tender to the touch. It hurt when he tugged his shirt back on, and even more so when he pulled his boxers and pants up over his legs. He decided to forgo the rest of his robes for the time being. Harry went to his bedroom door and locked it, though he knew it would hardly keep anyone out.

Unsure what else to do, Harry went to the bed and sat on the edge. He wondered how long Hermione and Ron would be gone, and what he would learn when they returned. Something horrible, probably. Harry didn't bother speculating.

Not wanting to be met with the disturbing sight of his reflection in the mirror above the bed, Harry closed his eyes and kept them resolutely shut. He slowly leaned backwards until he was laying on his back, careful not to move too quickly. The silky fabric of the blanket was pleasant and cool against his skin.

He decided that he might as well practice Occlumency again.

Think of no one, think of nothing…

Empty your mind…

Thoughts of the trial threatened to creep into his psyche, but Harry willed them away, not wanting to dwell on it…

Empty your mind…

Think of no one, think of nothing…

'Did you know, Mr. Potter, that memories rarely stand up in court?'

The Dark Lord's voice echoed in Harry's mind, cold and condescending. He shook his head, trying to shake it away…

Breathe in…

Breathe out…

'…We remember things the way we wish to remember them.'

Harry couldn't do it.

As much as he *wanted* to empty his mind and think of nothing, he couldn't. In the absence of scalding water to distract him with heat that bordered on painful, Harry couldn't keep his thoughts from drifting to the trial.

He ran his hands through his hair and stood. He went to gather the rest of his clothes when he turned and, almost despite himself, caught his reflection in the vanity mirror. He stood in front of it, examining himself and his scarlet eyes that he detested so much. He had half a mind to smash the thing again. He tried not to think about how it had broken the first time.

At least my skin doesn't look as bad as it feels, Harry thought. He touched his cheek gingerly, and though his face was flushed, it was not red nor blotchy.

"I almost didn't have to come back here," he said mournfully, recalling Percy's boldness and the aftermath of the trial. "I almost never had to step foot in this godforsaken place again."

His reflection frowned. "Rude," it muttered.

Harry's heart stopped.

Voldemort had chosen that exact moment to appear. Harry watched the Dark Lord materialize a few feet behind him in a flash of gilded darkness. He was still in the flowing robes he'd worn at the Ministry, the golden 'W' pinned to his chest.

His eyes found Harry's in the mirror. He smiled.

Harry swore under his breath and turned, his stilled heart now pounding. The Dark Lord's unexpected appearances were something he would never be prepared for.

"Harry," Voldemort murmured as a greeting. His eyes flickered down the length of Harry's body, his magic glittering amusedly.

"You can't just *do* that!" Harry yelled, one hand on his chest where his heart thundered against his ribs.

Voldemort smirked, a silent yet patronizing response. Harry knew what he was thinking—that he was Lord Voldemort, that he could do whatever he pleased.

"Where are Ron and Hermione?" Harry asked, forcing his anger aside.

"Out," Voldemort responded vaguely. "But perfectly safe."

"*Out?* What the hell does that mean? What have you made them do?"

Predictably, Voldemort ignored his questions and immediately began invading his personal space. "You performed well today, Harry," he said as he took a step forward. "I was very pleased."

"I wasn't *performing."* Rage bubbled in Harry's chest, momentarily sidetracking him from the topic of his friends. "I was being honest… unlike *you*."

"And yet I hardly had to lie at all. Dumbledore made it so *easy* for me. Nearly everything that was said today was true."

"No, it wasn't!" Harry shouted. "You—you tried to make it sound like Snape purposefully made you come after my father and I—but that wasn't what happened, *you* were the one who decided that it was me, not—"

His sentence ended abruptly. Harry couldn't say his name out loud.

Voldemort's magic flashed, but he did not complete Harry's statement, either. "Is that truly so unbelievable, Harry? What do you think is more likely—that Severus Snape foolishly told me about the prophecy before considering what it meant himself, and then was shocked when I took it to mean you…? Or that Snape, an intelligent man, contemplated who it might possibly mean first, and sought to use the information to his advantage? He knew that I would have found out about the prophecy eventually; I had Death Eaters working

undercover in all departments within the Ministry, including the Department of Mysteries. What do you think someone like Severus Snape would have done in his position?"

Harry's mouth went dry. He shook his head, still refusing to believe him. "Dumbledore said—"

"Dumbledore said and did *many* things, the majority of which were *underhanded* and *vile*," Voldemort spat.

"Wow. I bet you have no idea what that's like," Harry shot back.

"It is almost impressive, your inability to learn respect."

"I only pay *respect* to people who earn it. From where I'm standing, you hardly seem deserving."

Voldemort smiled like a monster barring its teeth. "From where you're standing…" he repeated softly. Then his voice rose, sharp and bitter. "I should force you to wear a magically suppressing collar at all times, strip you bare and drag you on a leash through the Ministry of Magic. Then you and the entire *wizarding world* will know *exactly* where you stand… or don't."

"No, you won't," Harry said tonelessly, like he could will the concept away with an opposing statement.

"But chains suit you, Harry," Voldemort crooned.

"No, you won't," Harry repeated, and as he said it a second time he realized that it was not just wishful thinking, but true. "That would undo a lot of your own hard work. You've been putting forth a lot of time and energy, convincing the public that you're not completely insane. If you were trying to rule like the mad man you are, you wouldn't have gone to the trouble of that trial. You wouldn't have bothered to *free* me. You're trying to appear as a just and level-headed ruler, and dragging people around on leashes isn't exactly the behavior of a sane man."

Voldemort's expression and magic darkened. "Has it ever occurred to you, Harry, that I *am* a just and level-headed ruler?"

Harry almost snorted. "No, that thought has never once occurred to me," he said. "You may be able to fool the rest of the world, but not me. I know what you are. A skilled liar, someone who *underhandedly* and *vilely* twists words and warps the truth to fit

his agenda."

Voldemort's magic continued to darken in rage, though his face remained composed. Harry hardly cared, ignoring the warning signs as his own anger soared.

"I merely presented the facts in a different light," Voldemort said. "None of what I said was a fabrication."

"I remember it *differently*," Harry responded coolly.

Voldemort took another step closer to Harry, closing the gap between them. "Tell me then, Harry," he murmured, moving closer still. "Tell me when I lied."

"When you talked about my mother." Rage was simmering in Harry's chest, threatening to explode at any moment.

"That was not a lie, merely a speculation… Though there is evidence to suggest that what I said was accurate. But we'll never know, shall we? The dead don't talk."

"Except for when they do. I wonder, what did your victims say when they prowled near you, that fateful night in the graveyard when you failed to best me, *yet again?* What did my father say, what did my *mother* say, as you tried once more to murder her son?" Harry's lips twitched at how stone-like Voldemort's face had become. "I can't imagine it was anything kind," he finished, smirking.

"They were not *real*," Voldemort hissed.

"Convenient, that. How you get to pick and choose what's real and what's not."

"Yes, I *do* decide what is real, what is the truth," Voldemort said. "Or are you unaware that the history of the world is written by the victors? I have won this war, and I will declare the truth in the manner which I best see fit to do so, in whatever way I see necessary."

"And you saw it *necessary* to make my mother out to be some manipulative witch?" Harry laughed bitterly. "No, you know that lie was anything but *necessary!* You just said that because you're terrible and bitter, because you're angry at me for knowing the truth! Just because *your* mother had to drug *your* father with a love potion doesn't mean that mine did! You can't force your tragic life onto mine!"

Voldemort was moving closer; his magic was whirling in a perilous manner and he was watching Harry with bright, blood-red eyes. Harry ignored all of it, too caught up in his own fury to care how much he might anger the Dark Lord. "My mother was *good*, but you just had to get revenge, didn't you? Because that's how twisted you are! Because you're a horrible, manipulative, twisted, spiteful, *evil*—"

"You're beautiful."

Harry's train of thought came to a jarring halt. He stared stupidly for a moment, thinking he must have just imagined that outlandish statement—but with a thrill of anxiety realized that he had not. Voldemort's magic had not been growing with anger, as Harry assumed, but with… something else. It was glinting, moving in that strange way which made Harry think of a cat's tail flickering back and forth, a focused predator about to strike.

The Dark Lord, against all logic, was not angry. His aura was glistening with an irrefutable, dark *lust*, that toxic *want*.

And he had just said…

Oh.

Voldemort took another step closer; Harry took a step back. "Wh-what?" he stuttered, flustered as he willed his rage-fueled boldness to not abandon him.

"You should have *seen* yourself," Voldemort purred. He was completely undeterred by Harry's small withdrawal. He looked at Harry's face with far too much interest, with far too much of that insane fondness glimmering in his magic. "You nearly managed to escape the enchanted chains which monitor emotional energy and respond accordingly. I've never seen anyone move so quickly. You made it halfway across the court room. It was such a lovely rage, such passionate *magic*…"

Harry was frozen as Voldemort spoke in an unsettling, velvety tone. He was moving closer still, and soon the backs of Harry's legs were hitting the vanity in his retreat, that *damn* vanity, and he could back away from the Dark Lord's advances no longer.

"Your magic is *divine*," Voldemort finished with reverence. Harry's anger had fled, replaced by a high-strung anxiety. His heart was fluttering like mad as the Dark Lord stared at him, leaning in as his gilded, black magic wrapped around Harry possessively. Harry was

immobilized as the heat of Voldemort's breath fanned across his face.

"I hate you," Harry whispered shakily.

Voldemort smiled as though Harry had just said the opposite. He lifted his pale fingers to Harry's chin, gently tilting his head back. That evocative warmth bloomed at his fingertips.

"You do so… *beautifully*…"

And without further warning, Voldemort was pressing his lips to Harry's.

Light, vibrant and lovely, radiated from his kiss in an unfathomable way. It was thought-annihilating, it was debilitating—Harry felt like someone had knocked him from his broom and he was caught in that moment of suspension, that weightless feeling before the inevitable plummet to his damning…

Except the weightless feeling never ended. When Voldemort's tongue ran across his lower lip, Harry's mouth opened as though moving of its own accord, his mind buzzing with that buoyancy as Voldemort's tongue slid against his own, effortlessly coaxing him into reciprocation…

It was easy, far too easy, to forget. Everything was light and bliss, and Harry felt like he was floating as Voldemort's hands found their way into his unruly hair. A heat began to rise in Harry's chest, fire to accompany that weightless ecstasy—

No, some very, very small voice in the back of his head said. *No, this is Voldemort, and you're falling for his trap—this is just another kind of manipulation, what he's doing now, and you're* letting him use you—

Bolstering every ounce of resolve he had, Harry willed it to stop.

…He had never tried that, before.

Many times, Harry had tried to not let the pleasant light of their connection overwhelm him, but he had never once attempted to make it go away. He had never considered it as a viable option. He assumed that he had no power where their bond was concerned, that only the Dark Lord could control that beautiful warmth.

This did not seem to be the case.

It was difficult, yes, but Harry was astounded to find that it was working. He concentrated with all his might, and as he did, the light began to slowly but undeniably fade.

Harry felt a flickering of slight confusion that definitely wasn't his. Voldemort's grip in his hair tightened and his magic brightened hungrily. He forced Harry's head back further, demanding more access, like he might be able to reach into Harry's mouth with his tongue and swallow the light of his soul.

When the warmth continued to diminish despite this, Voldemort pulled away. His magic twitched with a mixture of confusion and mild panic, clearly wondering why it wasn't working, why the sensation of a whole, virgin soul was being denied him. He locked eyes with Harry, his brows raised.

Harry smiled crookedly. He didn't need to speak for Voldemort to know what he was thinking. He knew the Dark Lord could read his thoughts as clearly as though he were screaming them.

I can keep this from you.

Harry wondered if the Dark Lord was seeing the same glint of superiority in his red eyes that Harry had so often had to endure from Voldemort. He wondered if his haughty grin was just as demeaning.

He wondered if, in that brief moment where the Dark Lord's handsome, deceptive face read blank horror…

He wondered if Voldemort felt helpless.

The world turned red in a blinding flash of pain.

White-hot agony exploded across Harry's forehead, igniting in his scar and quickly spreading throughout his entire being. It was a horror he knew—the torturous, endless pain of the Dark Lord's unwanted influence over his body…

A bloodthirsty, crimson serpent was coiled intimately around him, inside him, scorching in his skin, boiling in his blood… The monster was twisting in his heart and wound within his soul, it was bleeding into his bones and woven into his muscles…

When the monstrosity that was Lord Voldemort spoke, he used Harry's jaw, and it was from Harry's own mouth from which the warning issued. A threat which the Dark Lord had said to him once before,

only this time the words came from Harry's lips.

"…*Never again…*"

It ended. Harry's sight came rushing back, no longer lost in a sea of red. He was on the ground, heart pounding, body shaking so violently it was like he was laying in a bed of ice. His scar still stung, and as Harry's trembling fingers touched his forehead, he found that it was once more weeping with blood.

Voldemort remained on his feet. Harry looked at him, quivering on the floor.

The Dark Lord may have been able to cope with the pain better than Harry, but it was clear that he had experienced it just as profoundly. His magic was unsteady, animated darkness with flecks of gold glinting sporadically, and there was blood on his neck…

It took Harry a moment to realize where it had come from. Voldemort's ears were bleeding.

Harry pushed himself up so that he was in a kneeling position. Blood dripped from his scar into his eyes, but he didn't wipe it away. He looked at the Dark Lord, feeling inexplicably bolder than he ever had, even as his body trembled.

"This is what you are," he said, bloood falling into his eyes, blurring his vision and tinting his world scarlet again. Harry let it happen.

"Everything you touch breaks, and someday, you're going to break me, too… And then what will you have, *Voldemort?*"

The Dark Lord's magic was going wild with conflict. There were so many emotions there, a tangled mess of black and gold… but most apparent in that whirlwind of feelings was *fear*.

Fear as he looked down at Harry's bleeding scar, *fear* at the realization that he could push his last horcrux beyond repair…

Voldemort's face was a porcelain mask. Harry held his breath, waiting for his reaction—he shook his head slightly, some other emotion shimmering from within that cloud of blackness—

He disappeared.

Harry gaped, stunned at the sudden retreat… because that was what it

was. A retreat.

Lord Voldemort… had *fled*.

Harry exhaled and fell to his side, finally wiping the blood from his face. He lay there, his limbs shaking and mind reeling at what he had just learned.

He could keep that seductive light from him, if he wanted…

Voldemort may have been able to cause Harry terrible pain while possessing him, but he hadn't been able to make that connection open back up again with sheer force—otherwise it would have happened just now, Harry was certain. No, Harry had to *let* him…

This changed everything.

Harry let out a mangled, breathy laugh. Now they were playing an altogether different game…

And the next move was Voldemort's.

Engagements

Harry waited until his body stopped shaking before attempting to stand. It was a long time. Nearly twenty minutes had passed by before his hands were no longer trembling. Once he finally felt that his limbs were steady, he pushed himself to his feet.

His scar was still bleeding.

Harry had continually wiped the blood away where he was on the ground, his hands and forearms now stained red. He made his way to the bathroom to wash it off.

The moisture from his overly hot shower had long since dissipated. Harry glanced at his reflection before looking away, rinsing his arms in the sink.

Except his scar still stung, and blood continued to drip from it—albeit at a much slower pace. Harry grabbed a tissue and held it to his forehead. It had bled for *hours* the last time he'd suffered Voldemort's wrath…

Harry waited a moment before removing the now stained tissue. He groaned. Yes, it was still bleeding. Harry watched with great annoyance as beads of scarlet welled along the line like lightning before tipping over, dripping down his forehead and traveling towards his eyes.

He wiped them up before they could get there. *Great,* he thought. Either he had to wait until it stopped, or he would be walking around Malfoy Manor holding a cloth to his bloody forehead…

Harry threw away the tissue once it was too saturated and grabbed a towel instead, then went and laid on his bed again, pressing it firmly to his forehead. He was just going to have to wait it out, then.

He closed his eyes to avoid the mirror above him and slowly exhaled. He did not even consider practicing Occlumency again; there was no chance at all that he would be able to clear his mind after what had just happened…

The pain had been so absolute that Harry, shaking and bleeding profusely in the wake of Voldemort's flight, hadn't been able to properly dwell on what he had done; he'd been blinded by agony.

When he'd spoken directly afterwards, it was like some other person had made the accusation.

Everything you touch breaks, and someday, you're going to break me, too… And then what will you have, Voldemort?

How could he have said such a thing? How could he *still* be stupid enough to taunt Voldemort when he *knew* that he held his friends' lives in his hands?

He wondered what Voldemort would do now. Harry was certain that it would be horrible.

Thoughts of Ron and Hermione being tortured jumped to his mind first, but Harry was not so sure that the Dark Lord would be quick to harm either of them. At the moment, Voldemort was using them for… something. At the very least, that meant that they were out in the public eye, for they had been summoned to the Ministry of Magic. Harry knew that such things did not guarantee their safety—nothing could guarantee that for anyone associated with the Boy Who Lived at this point, Harry thought sourly—but it did… lessen the likelihood that the Dark Lord would interrupt whatever task he had set them, only to drag them back to Malfoy Manor to teach his human horcrux a lesson.

Or did it? Harry frowned, considering this at length as he tried to see the world from the Dark Lord's point of view. Maybe he was wrong. Perhaps torturing Hermione and Ron was *exactly* what Voldemort would do once he'd managed to get his many conflicting emotions in check and settle on rage… as he usually did.

But then a startling comprehension made Harry sit bolt-upright. No, Voldemort would not use Hermione and Ron, not when they were working for him—but he had said it himself, hadn't he? Days and days ago, after he had first taken Harry captive and Neville's body had laid on the dungeon floor, bleeding and sightless—there were countless others he could take—

Do I need chains to hold you, Harry Potter?

"He's going to kill Percy," Harry said aloud to himself. Percy Weasley, who had just spoken for him so boldly at his trial, who had hugged him afterwards, the action causing Voldemort's magic to blacken horrifically…

He had to do something.

Harry stood, grabbed his shoes and outer robe from the bathroom floor, and walked quickly towards the foyer. His scar was still bleeding, but he ignored it, heart thumping rapidly now with this realization storming his mind. There was only one fireplace in this Manor that was connected to the floo network; if he was lucky, Draco would not be near it and he could take it to the Ministry, just as Hermione and Ron had… Percy was probably still there, too…

But luck was not on Harry's side as of late. Draco was sitting at the table right next to the fireplace, sipping on tea and reading a book, looking bored. He perked up at once when Harry arrived, nearly running as he came down the stairs.

"What are you—"

"I'm going to the Ministry." Harry went straight for the fireplace, but Malfoy dropped his book, stood, and whipped out his wand before he could get close.

Harry cast him the most menacing glower he could muster—which must have been rather effective, considering his scarlet eyes and ominously bleeding forehead—and though Draco's magic danced in apprehension, he did not back down. When Harry reached for the shelf which held a glass container full of floor powder, he raised his wand higher. "Don't even think about it," he said.

"I have to, Malfoy."

Malfoy glared and shouted *"Stupefy!"*, and red flash of magic shot out from the tip of his wand, forcing Harry to jump back in order to avoid it.

"Hey!" he shouted angrily. "You can't just *stun* me—"

"I absolutely can! "And I've been told to do so if I need to, and—and why do you want to go to the Ministry, anyway? To go after Granger and Weasley? Because I can guarantee that if you think you can save them from whatever the Dark Lord wants them to do, you're just wrong—"

"That's not why," Harry seethed. Blood dripped onto his eyelashes; he hurriedly wiped it away.

"I don't have time to sit here and explain it to you, Malfoy! It's just very important, I need to go warn someone about something is all—I won't be gone long, just a quick Ministry excursion—I'm good at those

—"

Harry reached for the floo powder again, and narrowly missed a second curse. "No!" Malfoy yelled afterwards, keeping his wand pointed at Harry's face. "No *fucking* way! And if you try that again, I will knock you out, Potter!"

Harry's fingers curled in his hair, the urge to tear it from his scalp overwhelming. "Malfoy, you don't understand. It's not Hermione and Ron, it's someone else, and if I don't go warn them…"

"Who?" Draco asked sharply when Harry's voice trailed off.

Harry didn't see the point in not telling him. "Percy Weasley," he said. "I just—I did something stupid to piss him off a few minutes ago, and —"

"A few minutes ago?" Draco's magic twitched in great alarm. "What do you mean, a few minutes ago? The Dark Lord was here? Just now? I thought he was at the Ministry still!"

"Er. Yeah, he was. For a minute, but then he left again—"

"What for? What did he come back here for?"

Harry's mind went blank.

He knew the reason why, of course. The Dark Lord had returned so quickly to Malfoy Manor for Harry—or more precisely, Harry's soul. Harry knew the reason for his swiftness was to bask in that horrendously addictive light that Harry's unbroken soul allowed him, that affected both of them in a bizarre yet glorious way…

But there were about a thousand different reasons why Harry couldn't explain this to Draco. Harry felt his face growing warm despite his best efforts, and Draco's head cocked to the side suspiciously.

"Because—because he lives to torment me, obviously!" Harry shouted, hoping that his red face would be interpreted as anger rather than… something else. "He came back to gloat, and I said something idiotic in response—"

"As you do," Draco interjected drily.

Harry glowered at him. "…As I do," he agreed regardless, "and now I am almost positive he's going to take it out on Percy Weasley."

Draco looked thoughtful for a moment before nodding. "Yeah," he said. "I could see that."

"Great. So, I'm going to—"

"What? Oh, no, I'm not letting you go," Draco sneered, his magic brightening in amusement. "I agree with you, yes. That doesn't mean I'm letting you leave."

Harry gaped at him. "But he's going to—"

"Torment another Weasley to punish you? Yeah, probably. Guess you should have thought of that before you pissed him off."

Harry's hands clenched into fists. Blood dripped into his eyes again, and Draco watched him wipe it away with great apprehension. Harry could tell he was curious as to why his scar was bleeding but was too anxious to ask. "Malfoy, let me go."

"And what if I did? What do you think would happen?" Draco took a step closer to him, but Harry was unaffected by his advance. He supposed having Voldemort constantly attempting to make him back down caused everyone else to look pathetic in comparison. "Say you go. Then what? You find Percy Weasley, tell him to go home, and that's that? Harry Potter has saved the day?" He scoffed condescendingly. "No, what would happen is this. You'd go and you'd be accosted by a hundred people in the atrium and make it absolutely nowhere near your goal. The Dark Lord would find out that I let you leave, and then *I'd* be the one on the receiving end of a Cruciatus curse right alongside Percy Weasley. And that's the *best* case scenario. Besides, even if you did manage to warn Weasley, it wouldn't do him any good anyway. The Dark Lord can find anyone. If he wants to make someone suffer, he will. Running only makes that suffering exponentially worse."

Harry contemplated this. As much as he wanted to tell Draco he was wrong, he knew he couldn't. "You're right," he said blankly. He ran a hand through his hair, probably getting blood in it but not much caring. "Fuck. You're right."

Draco looked mildly astonished that Harry Potter had just admitted that he was right about something. "Yeah," he said in a hedged tone, "I am."

Harry was hardly focused on Draco enough to care about his state of disbelief; his mind was already rushing on to other options. He

couldn't warn Percy. No, that wouldn't work… He was coming at this from the wrong angle…

What he needed to do was convince Voldemort.

If he could talk to Voldemort again before he sought anyone else out for retribution, then he could make it right, he could persuade him to leave Percy alone…

But where had the Dark Lord gone? Back to the Ministry? Harry doubted it. He had no idea where the Dark Lord might go to sort through his mess of feelings and… plot his next move, undoubtedly, but he was sure it was somewhere secluded. Harry closed his eyes and focused, willing their strange connection to show him the Dark Lord's mind, to allow him to see through his eyes where Lord Voldemort was…

"What *are* you doing?"

"Shut up."

"You look like you're about to have an aneurism."

"Shut up, Malfoy, I'm trying to focus—"

"On *what?*"

Harry's eyes flew open and he let out a strangled, angry sound. "God, you're insufferable!"

Malfoy's magic twitched in amusement at getting a rise out of him. Harry glowered. As much as he wished he could blame Malfoy for being unable to see through Voldemort's eyes, he knew that this was not the case. This was not the battle of Hogwarts; Voldemort was not unaware of the extent of their connection anymore, nor was he distracted by a myriad of immediate pressing concerns. Harry could not simply close his eyes and see what the Dark Lord was seeing. Wherever he was, Voldemort was without a doubt practicing Occlumency against him.

Another drop of blood landed in Harry's left eye. Feeling more frustrated with every passing second, he wiped it away with the back of his sleeve. Malfoy's nose wrinkled when he did, and Harry remembered that these were more than likely his robes.

Before he could say anything, the fireplace ignited in green flames.

Ron stepped into the foyer first, his magic strangely cheery, followed shortly by Hermione.

Harry opened his mouth with every intention of spewing out the first of a series of questions—Were they okay? What had the Dark Lord made them do? Had they seen Percy?—but then Hermione took a step further into the room, and Harry's attention was effectively sidetracked.

Harry never would have thought he was the type to be distracted by something as asinine as *jewelry*, but he wasn't quite sure if the thing glinting on Hermione's left hand could qualify as that.

The diamond—*was* it a diamond?—was absolutely *massive*.

It was so big and attention-grabbing that it simply *had* to be enchanted, catching the light as though there were a miniature, magical spotlight shining directly on it. Hermione held her hand to her chest at Harry's wide-eyed stare, and when she moved, it glittered with the majesty of a thousand tiny prisms.

Harry said, 'What is that?' at the same moment that Draco said, 'Holy fuck'. Hermione flushed and her magic whirled nervously.

"What is that?" Harry repeated, glancing quickly to Ron and seeing that his face and ears were turning red. "Hermione, *what is that?"*

He knew what it was. There were probably people back in London who could see the lights shining off the massive stone on the ring finger of Hermione Granger's left hand. Hermione cleared her throat before saying, in a very timid voice, "M-my engagement ring."

"You're engaged," he said blankly. She nodded meekly. Harry looked at Ron. "Are you also engaged?"

Ron managed to give him a sarcastic, annoyed look before laughing. "Yeah," he said, scratching the back of his head. "Yeah, we're… We're engaged!"

Hermione's eyes fell bashfully to the floor. Harry had never before seen her face turn redder than Ron's.

"Is *that* what the Dark Lord wanted you both for?" Draco asked in tones of great disbelief. He was still staring at the obviously very expensive ring like it might be a joke.

"Actually, yes," Hermione said quietly. "Th-they've begun developing a new sub-department at the Ministry of Magic, one which falls under the Department of Magical Law Enforcement… The Magical Marriage Registration."

"*What?"*

Harry and Draco once more spoke at the same time. Harry took some small comfort in knowing that this information was just as new to Draco as it was to him.

"Yes, it—oh, Harry, your scar—"

Harry hurriedly wiped the blood away again. "I'm fine. It's fine," he lied. It *did* seem to be bleeding less now, at least, and it no longer hurt. "They're forcing people to get married now?" he asked with great revulsion.

"No, no, nothing like that," said Ron.

"Not exactly," Hermione said in a much darker tone. "It's something the Ministry of Magic has never done before. Anyone who wants to get married from now on must first get the approval from this committee—I'm sure you can guess a few of the people who are on it. They're arguing that it's a way to keep track of the growth of magical families more reliably, but that's obviously not the real reason."

Ron raised an eyebrow at her. "It's not?"

"Honestly, Ron, weren't you listening to a single thing he said?" Hermione snapped. For a brief moment it almost felt like they were back in school, and Ron was merely being chastised by Hermione for not paying attention during History of Magic.

"I was, of course I was—"

"Then the underlying reasoning should have been perfectly clear!"

"Excuse me for not catching on to the *underlying reasoning*. It's a bit hard to think about devious tactics when you know it's very likely that the next words out of the person you're supposed to be listening to's mouth could be *'crucio'* or *'avada kedavra'* or—"

"*What* underlying reasoning?" Harry interjected.

"This committee is coming into existence to make sure that muggles

can't marry anyone with magical capabilities, obviously," Hermione explained in a distasteful tone. "Along with the need for approval, the Ministry is now only recognizing unions that are made in the traditional, wizarding way… Ron and I are essentially the trial run."

Harry was about to ask what the traditional, wizarding way was, but Draco spoke before he could. "*You* didn't buy that," he blurted out insensitively, pointing towards Hermione's ring but looking at Ron. "There's no way *you* could afford something like that, Weasley."

Ron glared at him, and his magic darkened so much that it was nearly red. "…No, as a matter of fact, I didn't pay for it," he said coldly. "I would have, I *expected* to… but I didn't have to. Harry, remember when I was called to the Ministry the other day, after Hermione came back?"

Harry nodded mutely. "Well, this was why I was summoned. To fill out the first half of the paperwork and—and go *ring shopping*. With *your* mum and dad," he finished, looking at Draco. "Yeah. It was the strangest experience of my life. They took me to the kind of store I never would have even considered walking in before, and when I said I couldn't afford anything in there, your dad almost hexed me. *Do you seriously think anyone expects* you *to pay for this, Weasley?"*

Harry thought that Ron's impersonation of Lucius Malfoy was rather poor, but he didn't comment on it. "Anyway, the insinuation was clear. I said, 'Oh, well. If that's the case, I want the nicest and most expensive ring in the shop'. I didn't expect them to take me seriously; the shop owner certainly didn't. The poor wizard stared at me like I'd lost my marbles… but then your dad was showing him his Dark Mark, your mum was making this face like the shop owner was the dirt beneath her shoes, and then, well…"

He gestured towards Hermione's dazzling ring. "Blimey," Harry said, staring at it and its unfathomable size. "That thing must weigh a ton! I'm surprised you can lift your hand, Hermione."

"Actually, it doesn't weigh much at all. It's enchanted to be light. I hardly feel anything."

She waved her hand around as though to prove the point. Harry's mind was positively reeling. "But—so—you're getting *married*!"

"Er, yeah," Ron said.

"When!?"

"…N-next Saturday."

"*What?"* Harry gasped. "But—how? *Where?"*

"Um." Hermione fidgeted uncomfortable. "H-here. At Malfoy Manor."

"*No."*

They all turned at Draco's perilously low tone. His magic turned an unsightly shade of bluish-gray, and his expression was nothing short of horrified. "Here?" he asked, gaping. "*Here?"*

Hermione nodded. "Yes… I think that's where your mother went, actually, to m-meet with wedding planners… She asked if we wanted to go, but we said we'd rather c-come back here, obviously… And I don't know where your father went, to be honest…"

"No, of course you don't. No one does. *Fuck."* Draco's face paled further. "A wedding, *here*... Fuck. This… this is *horrible!"*

"Why?" Harry asked. Even though he was still in a state of complete shock, he was beginning to grin despite himself. Ron and Hermione were getting *married*…

"You don't know my family," Draco said in tones of deepest despair. "My mother—she and my father host a huge party for Yuletide every year, and *every* year, it's absolute *mayhem*. My mother goes insane when she plans those things. My father always mysteriously vanishes, and I have no idea where he goes, because he doesn't *take me with him* —just leaves me here with her, scrambling as I try and cover for him… And those parties are with months of notice! But a wedding? A *wedding*? In a *week*?" Draco shook his head and looked devastated. "It's going to be a fucking *nightmare*."

Harry's only experience with wedding planning had been his time at the Burrow for Fleur and Bill's wedding, and he vividly remembered Mrs. Weasley's high-strung attitude. He tried to imagine the equivalent of that anxiety in Mrs. Malfoy.

Somehow, he had a feeling that Draco was not overreacting.

"But why here?" Harry asked, trying to wrap his mind around this most unlikely of situations. "Why are you getting married here, and so soon?"

"Because that's what we were told was going to happen," Ron said.

"Apparently it's going to be a huge thing. A *huge* thing. I don't get it either… You-know-who never struck me as the type to care about weddings or parties…"

"Honestly Ron, how can you be so naïve? He isn't having Mrs. Malfoy organize a huge wizarding wedding because he cares about weddings or likes to *party*, he's *using* this as a political event!"

"What?" Ron said, having clearly not realized this at all.

"He's *using* us as a way to show just how *wonderful* it can be in his new world. A union between a muggle-born who's been properly registered and a pureblood who's been pardoned, both of whom are known to be close to the Boy Who Lived—if *we* can be in good graces with the Dark Lord, then it makes the statement that anyone can. He's making our wedding a grand event and basically demanding that everyone even slightly important attend the reception as a statement, to convince those who still oppose him that he's not the tyrannical ruler they think he is. It seems he's already begun to do that quite efficiently by regaining a much more human body and by handling Harry's trial the way he did…"

"He told you about that," said Harry. It was not a question but a statement. Hermione nodded solemnly. "Yes, he did… He was very informative, actually, and unexpectedly polite…"

"Oh, yeah, *real* polite," Ron muttered. "Once he stopped making your forearm burn like it was on fire, of course."

"But that's not even the craziest thing that happened," Hermione went on in a rush, ignoring Ron. "Harry, look."

She reached into her robes. Harry's eyes went wide as Hermione revealed something even more unimaginable than her engagement ring.

A *wand.*

Her wand.

Hermione Granger *had been given her wand back.*

"I know," she said, staring at it like not even *she* could quite believe she was holding her wand again. "I'm officially and legally allowed to carry a wand, now…"

They all turned when Draco, quite unexpectedly, laughed. He began explaining himself before any of them could ask. "The Muggle-born's a Death Eater, the pureblood was found guilty of treason and is now indentured to the Ministry of Magic for six months—wand privileges suspended, of course—and Harry Potter's a free man." He looked about at the three of them with his hands on his hips, surveying them with false cheer. "Ah, but at least there's a *wedding* to look forward to! Fuck… You know, If you would've asked me before how everything would pan out after the war, I would have been *way* off."

Ron glowered at him, but Harry just nodded and shrugged. "Yeah. Can't say I saw any of this coming, either."

Harry turned his attention back to Hermione, who was still staring at her wand in a state of suspended disbelief. Harry's mind raced at the implications. Draco had just said it himself, after all… Harry was, supposedly, a free man as far as the general public was concerned. *He* hadn't been sentenced to work for the Ministry, *he* hadn't had his wand privileges suspended…

A fierce desire to carry a wand again stirred within Harry's chest like a laden monster sniffing the air in anticipation. Of course, it wouldn't be *his* wand if he was allowed one, seeing as Voldemort had *vanished* it…

Harry forced that boiling anger aside. Hermione's hand and magic had begun trembling, making Harry concerned. "Hermione?" he said, touching her shoulder.

"You know, I thought it was strange, when Malfoy said he made you make a patronus before your trial," she murmured, not lifting her gaze from her wand. "Why would he bother doing that? It was obvious it was you to everyone in the courtroom; you'd supposedly been held for days in Azkaban. Even the most potent Polyjuice potion can't last more than a few hours… So why would he do that? Why would he demand that you make a patronus? A spell that is really difficult to cast no matter when you attempt to do it, but significantly *more* difficult when you're distressed, or after you've experienced some horrible trauma…"

Harry, Draco, and Ron were all staring at her, her hand trembling more with every word she spoke, but they didn't interrupt. "And I think I know why, now. I don't think it had anything to do with proving it was you. I think he was curious. Because patronuses can change, and they often do after traumatic experiences—especially

where regret is involved. I think he wanted to know if you were still the same Harry Potter. He wanted to know if whatever horrible things he's put you through managed to change you, and to broadcast it to the entire world. I think he would like to know that he could accomplish that… But he couldn't." Hermione's eyes suddenly welled with tears. She looked up at Harry and smiled. "Of course you're still you, Harry. Nothing could change *you*."

She looked back to her wand. Harry suddenly understood her anxiety.

Hermione was wondering if the same was true of her.

"…Something happy," Harry said gently.

Her magic was dark and heavy. She swallowed hard and shook her head, tears welling in her eyes. "I don't know how you did it, Harry," she whispered. "How can you think of something happy enough to make a patronus after all that's happened, with everything that's happening now? We've lost the war, I-I've been marked as a *Death Eater*, Ron was forced to propose to me so that the Dark Lord could *use* us to his advantage—and I'm going to bring a *child* into this world—"

"Is that what you think?"

Ron interrupted her in a quiet but cold voice. Hermione looked at him, and as he stared back, Harry was certain he'd never seen a more serious expression on his face. "You think I only proposed to you because I was forced to?"

The atmosphere in the room became instantly tense. Hermione looked taken aback. "W-weren't you?"

"I wasn't *forced* to," Ron snapped, sounding uncharacteristically angry. Hermione winced. "I wasn't forced to propose to you, I could have said no—you seriously think I only asked you to marry me because I was *threatened* or something? I didn't even think about some underhanded bullshit, I was just thinking about *you!* I thought it was *obvious* that I'm ridiculously in love with you and want to be with you!"

For such a great confession of love, Ron looked very upset. His magic was quivering and his face was turning red again, but this time it was in anger. "Do you actually want to be with *me?* Or did you just say yes because you thought you'd be cursed otherwise, or something?"

Hermione's eyes were huge and shining with tears. She was staring at Ron like she'd never seen him properly before. "I… N-no, I…"

The tension was paramount. Harry and Draco glanced at each other, and without saying a word, Harry knew they were both thinking the same thing. Draco jerked his head to one side and started walking away.

"We'll just…" Harry began explaining, but neither Ron nor Hermione looked at him. Their eyes were fixed on each other, contrasting emotions so great that Harry wasn't sure if they were about to have a horrible row or something else entirely. He turned and followed Draco.

Clearly, Hermione and Ron had a *lot* to talk about.

Harry and Draco left as quickly as possible without breaking out into a run. They left through one of the doors at the back of the foyer, and didn't stop walking at a brisk pace until they had turned into a room at the end of the hall, far, far away from whatever drama was about to unfold between Hermione and Ron.

Harry was surprised to see that Draco had led him to a very old-fashioned looking sitting room. There were cushy chairs, shelves filled with books and odd but impressive-looking magical items, and a game table of some sort that made Harry think of pool but was clearly a wizarding equivalent.

There was also a bar, and Draco went straight for it. He walked behind the counter and grabbed a glass bottle full of amber liquid. Without a word, he pulled out two glasses and filled them, and then slid one across the bar towards Harry.

"I've heard of worse reasons to drink," he said. "You can't say I'm not a courteous host now, either."

Maybe, if he were thinking more clearly, Harry would have declined Malfoy's offer of alcohol. He didn't. Harry reached for the glass without even asking what was in it.

"To the *glorious* new regime," Draco said, smiling brightly and sarcastically. He lifted his glass towards Harry.

Harry's lips twitched despite himself. *At least my scar has stopped bleeding,* he thought as he quickly touched a hand to his forehead.

Harry clinked his glass to Draco's. "Cheers," he said with equal fake enthusiasm.

They both forcibly grinned and drained their glasses.

Violent Violet

Firewhisky.

It burned with a familiar feeling as it seared down Harry's throat, and for a moment he felt as though he were transported back in time.

He was not in Malfoy Manor but in the Burrow. He was raising a glass with his friends who had survived, who had risked *everything* for him in order to escape from Privet Drive unscathed… They were drinking to their fallen comrade who had died at the hands of Lord Voldemort himself, Alastor 'Mad-Eye' Moody…

Mundungus had abandoned him in the midst of their flight and Voldemort had *killed* him…

And just as Harry set the glass down on the bar, reality came crashing back in a sickening wave. The whisky did not dispel the numbness, nor give him a sense of courage as it had then, but burned in his gut in a nauseating way.

How could he have allowed himself to be so sidetracked?

He felt like he was losing his mind.

"Percy," he said the moment he was able to speak. His eyes were nearly watering with how strongly the whisky burned at the back of his throat. "I need to go back, I need to ask them—"

"Don't," Draco said shortly. He then pointed his wand at the door and said, "*Colloportus*."

Harry crossed the room and scowled as he attempted to wrench the door open. It was futile, of course; Draco had just magically locked it, and Harry did not have a wand of his own to cast the counter charm. He rounded on Malfoy. "Let me out," he demanded.

"Or what?" said Draco, who looked glad to have the bar between himself and Harry—as well as the only wand in the room. "Those two were on the verge of either killing each other or shagging, and I don't think you want to be in the middle of either of those interactions—or maybe you do, and you're more of a trio than I thought?"

"What? No, don't—that isn't—shut up!" Harry hated that such a ridiculous statement managed to fluster him. Draco poured himself

another drink and smirked. "I need to ask them if they saw Percy or not, if they know if he's okay—"

"Obviously they don't know anything about that or they would have said something. What, do you think the Dark Lord makes a scene and swoops in to abduct people in the middle of crowds? If he *did* or *is going* to take Percy Weasley, he'll do it stealthily. Probably have someone else escort him from the Ministry under false pretenses, and no one will be any the wiser that Percy Weasley is mysteriously missing until he *wants* them to know."

Harry glared at how casually Draco contemplated Percy's possible murder. "I have to do something," he said, his hands beginning to shake. "I need to get there, I need to do something—you have to let me out—"

"No, I don't." Malfoy lifted his glass to his lips, this time taking only a small sip. "Sit down, Potter," he said. He poured him another drink. "I'm going to tell you a story."

"A st…? Malfoy, I don't have time for a—I don't have time to just—to just sit here and have a bloody drink with you!"

"Trust me, you do," Draco murmured. He slid the glass towards him. "Right now, there is nothing that you can do to stop the Dark Lord from doing whatever he wants. In fact, the only thing you *can* do is not act like a moron and make matters worse for everyone. So take a seat."

Harry grit his teeth and didn't move. "Or don't," said Malfoy, shrugging. "Be stubborn. Fine. I can summon my house-elf and have him take you to your room and force a Dreamless Draught down your throat instead, if you like. Or just stun you and leave you passed out in here on the floor, locked in. My instructions for being a courteous host end the moment I feel you're on the verge of doing something reckless."

He was no longer smirking when he made those threats, which Harry found surprising. Even his magic had brightened with some emotion that was fickle and confusing. It wasn't gleeful, whatever it was. Harry would have expected Draco Malfoy to be relishing the fact that he had so much power over him.

But the days of Draco Malfoy being a prefect—or a member of the Inquisitorial Squad—who liked nothing more than to make Harry Potter suffer were long gone, and Malfoy looked oddly expressionless

as he motioned towards the barstool in front of him.

Forcing aside the powerful urge to lunge across the bar and wrestle Draco's wand out of his hand, Harry sat. The last thing he wanted was to be sentenced to an unwanted nap or knocked out and locked in this room, alone.

"Smart choice," said Malfoy. He pocketed his wand. Harry stared down at the second glass he'd been poured but didn't touch it. Draco didn't seem offended; he only took another sip of his own before speaking.

"I never would have thought that this summer could be more stressful than last year's," he said darkly. "After I succeeded in getting Death Eaters into the school, I thought I had done well. My father had been in Azkaban that entire year, but I didn't realize just how much danger he was in. In hindsight, it was rather naïve on my part. I thought that the Dark Lord was punishing him by simply keeping him in there until he thought that he and the others who'd been captured at the Ministry had had enough. I honestly thought he believed in me being able to do Dumbledore in. I never would have thought myself capable of such a feat, but I believed it after he talked to me. He's good at that, you know. Convincing people to believe in impossible things."

Draco took another sip of whisky. Harry didn't join him, though he did wrap his fingers around his glass simply so that he had something to do with his hands. He wondered why Draco was bothering to tell him this. Harry already knew the ending to this story.

"My mother was frantic, but I just blamed it on her being overprotective as usual. My aunt, on the other hand, was *so* proud, just fueling the fire of my arrogance. I went to Hogwarts with a Dark Mark on my arm feeling like some kind of god… It didn't last long. The full weight of everything really settled in after a few weeks. It became obvious just how hopeless it was. How could *I* kill Albus Dumbledore, one of the most powerful wizards in the world? I couldn't kill him. I couldn't kill anyone."

"You nearly killed *several* people, none of which were your intended targets," Harry interjected. "You almost killed Katie Bell with that stupid necklace, you almost killed Ron with—"

"I know!" Draco's magic shook with guilt. "You don't think I know? You don't think I feel bad about all that? Just because I didn't like either of them doesn't mean I wanted to kill them—I was just—I couldn't think of anything better, and I was too big-headed to let

Snape help me! I thought I had to do it on my own, because if I did, then surely my father would be forgiven? Surely he would break him out of Azkaban and we could be a family again?"

He ran a hand through his white-blonde locks, his calm disposition effectively shaken. He took a deep breath and carried on. "I didn't kill anyone, but I did succeed in getting the Death Eaters into the school. The Dark Lord was pleased overall—Dumbledore was dead, that was what he'd really wanted—but my father wasn't *entirely* forgiven. He promised then that he would break my father and the others out of Azkaban… and I'd never seen my mother look so afraid."

Draco laughed mirthlessly. "Do you know how strange it is to *dread* your father being freed from the most horrible place in the world? To realize fully that someone you care about was better off staying in a fortress surrounded by dementors than back at home, because home was where the Dark Lord's wrath awaited him?"

Harry didn't say anything. He recalled Dumbledore saying something along those lines himself after the fiasco at the Ministry, that Lucius Malfoy was probably thankful to be far away from his master's rage at his failure…

"It happened in late summer—not that the second mass breakout from Azkaban was reported in *The Daily Prophet*, mind you. Scrimgeour was still alive then, and he didn't want the wizarding world to know just how badly it was fucked, I guess… Regardless, my father was broken out by my aunt and a few of the newer recruits, dragged back here where the Dark Lord already was, where my mother and I were ordered to wait with him. He wanted us to see."

Draco took another drink of his whisky, a much longer one this time. His glass was nearly empty again. "I know you think you have the full measure of me," he said, feigning nonchalance. "I know you think I'm just some cowardly Slytherin who would never risk his own safety. But I'm not. We're more alike than you might think, Potter."

Harry scoffed. "Are we now," he said.

"We are," Draco said seriously. "We both do reckless things when we shouldn't because we think we're saving someone—I think I proved that plenty of times in our sixth year, don't you? I wasn't thinking about who *else* I might've hurt in the process that year, I was *only* thinking about *saving* my father. The major difference between us is just that, though. I only get that kind of daring when it's

someone really, *really* important to me. You? You'll do stupid shit to save just about anyone, even if you barely know them. Even if you despise them, in fact."

Harry's body burned at that. He couldn't exactly deny it. Feeling the sudden need to hide his face, he took a tiny sip of his drink. Draco finished his and poured himself another healthy dose.

"So my father came home," Draco went on, "and was thrown down by my aunt in the middle of the foyer before the Dark Lord, my mother and I standing behind him, forced to watch. He didn't look good, my father. A year in Azkaban had about as profound an effect on him as eleven years did on my aunt. I imagine it was because he spent his time in there dreading the day he would be inevitably *rescued*… He looked like he was on death's doorstep already. The Dark Lord was hardly sympathetic."

He paused. Draco's airy magic became darker than Harry had ever seen it. "You've been under the Cruciatus Curse when the Dark Lord's cast it."

It wasn't a question. Draco must have heard it, then, when Harry had first been brought to Malfoy Manor after the Battle of Hogwarts… before he was blinded, before Voldemort had gained a new body and still looked like the monster he truly was…

Are you afraid*, Tom?*

"You know how terrible it is," Draco concluded when Harry said nothing. "Two seconds under his curse feels like an eternity. For my father's punishment… he said he would place him under the curse for fourteen minutes." He paused again, took another drink. "One minute for every year the Dark Lord spent without a body. *Fourteen minutes.*"

Harry's mind reeled, wondering how long he personally had been held under the curse. Fierce memories of Neville writhing on the floor flooded his unwilling mind. It had seemed that Bellatrix had held him under the curse for ages, but Harry knew that in all actuality, no single curse could have lasted more than a minute at a time…

"He conjured an hourglass and everything. Fourteen minutes of torture for fourteen years of abandonment, and the Dark Lord said my father's failure at the Ministry would be forgiven… And my mother and I had to watch… We were told not to say or do anything, just watch what happens to those who fail him…"

Draco shuddered. Harry's heart was filled with an absurd pity for the entire Malfoy family.

"I couldn't do it," Draco said, and suddenly he was smiling. "That's right! I, Draco Malfoy, completely snapped and defied the Dark Lord's orders. I threw myself at his feet and shouted, begging him to end it at just four minutes in. That was when my father had stopped screaming and his mouth had begun to foam like a rabid dog's… My mother couldn't even hold me back. And you know what happened then?" He laughed coldly. "The Dark Lord lifted the curse from my father just to send me sprawling to the floor at his side, bound by an incarcerous. I begged and begged and begged. 'Please, torture me!' I yelled. 'Please, curse me instead!' Because my father already looked so weak. He was so frail, so emaciated. I was sure that he would not last the full fourteen minutes… But I could. I could do anything for him.

"The Dark Lord didn't care for my outburst at all."

Draco ran a hand through his hair again, his magic trembling far more than his body was. "He didn't even acknowledge my request to take it all upon myself. He just said that for my interruption he would be adding a full minute to my father's sentence. Now, I know how that sounds. What's one minute? Sixty seconds more, that doesn't sound so horrible, does it?"

Harry was not making any such argument, though Draco continued speaking as though he had. "It was the longest minute of my life, Potter. Every moment of his long torture was horrifying, don't get me wrong—each second my father was under that curse I felt like I should have been the one suffering, I should have been the one in pain. *I* had been the one who failed to kill Dumbledore myself, and maybe if I had, he would have been spared that… And it was all made that much worse by the fact that I saw it all happen at eye level, after I interrupted. I was on the floor with him, tied up and unable to do anything to help him…

"Those last sixty seconds, though… He had stopped screaming a long time ago, at that point. His eyes were flickering around in his skull like he was having a seizure. During that last minute, with every second I thought, 'What if this is the moment his sanity cracks? What if this is the exact moment he loses his mind?'"

Harry's heart was pounding. He felt like he was reliving this precise, final minute of torture with Draco right then, whose magic was trembling as he recalled the memory. Even though Harry knew that

Lucius Malfoy *had* clung to his sanity after the fact, adrenaline was flooding Harry's veins, imagining the older Malfoy who was usually so dignified thrashing on the floor, unable to even scream. Draco took another long drink, finishing what was his third serving of firewhisky. Harry followed suit and drained his own glass.

"The point I'm trying to make, Potter," Draco said after a long stretch of silence, "is that you should never try and stop the Dark Lord from doing what it is he wants to do, especially when it comes to hurting the people he wants to hurt. It only makes things worse for them. My mother tried to teach me that lesson herself so that I wouldn't have to learn the hard way. I wish I would have listened. She stood by the entire time my father was tortured and I was bound at his side, never once making a sound… because she knew what would happen if she had. Learn from my mistake. Don't run off trying to be a hero when the Dark Lord is involved, because if you do, you will end up damning whoever it is he's targeting even more than they already are."

Harry knew that there was irrefutable wisdom in his words, but he couldn't just nod and accept them. "I can't," he said, "I can't just sit here and do nothing, not knowing what he—"

"Yes, you can. I know it *sucks*, I know it's probably the hardest thing for *you* in the world—little hero Harry Potter, needing to sit still and not run off on some dangerous, thrilling adventure—but it's the only thing you *can* do. What you need to learn, Potter, is how to compartmentalize."

A strangled laugh was escaping Harry's throat before he could stop it. "Compartmentalize?" he repeated dubiously. "I can't do that, I can't just shut off my feelings—because I'm *not* like you, I'm *not*—"

Harry got to his feet. He swayed when he stood as the blood rushed far too quickly to his head. He felt dizzy and too warm, too trapped. He rushed towards the door again, ignoring the reality that it was locked and that he could not get out.

"Potter!" Draco snapped, but Harry didn't turn. Draco followed him, grabbed him by the shoulder and twisted him around, slamming him against the locked door with his wand at Harry's chest. He did so with ease; Harry was still so weak from his time in the cell beneath the manor. "Calm down, or I'm going to have to—to stun you or—"

Harry barely heard his threats. His heart was thundering so loudly and there were screams echoing in the back of his mind—he couldn't tell

whose they were; they could have been his own or Neville's or his mother's or someone else's entirely—his breath was catching and Draco's eyes were so wide—

There was a flash of glinting darkness, and Draco released his hold on Harry's robes.

The Dark Lord did not arrive silently nor stealthily. All the lights flickered and the glasses trembled loudly on the bar. Voldemort's magic was suffocating and undeniable, and Draco had turned and was on his knees with his head bowed before Harry could blink.

"M-m-m-my Lord," Draco stuttered out in a high voice. Voldemort towered over him, his face bloodless and his eyes fiercely red. Harry had never heard Draco sound so afraid. Perhaps he thought that he was about to be severely punished for being found like this, for having Harry up against a wall and looking like he was about to hex him… which he *was*, but then again, Draco had been told that he could.

Harry's pulse picked up again as he mentally scrambled to gather himself. He was still shaking from what he was sure was about to be another panic attack.

Voldemort's magic was unreadable, whirling with too many emotions for Harry to try and decode any of them, but his sinister expression softened when his eyes met Harry's. He stepped past Draco—whose bright magic quivered as his master drew near—and grabbed Harry by the forearm.

"Breathe," Voldemort instructed in a low voice.

Harry hadn't realized he wasn't. He drew in a deep breath, and Voldemort's magic flickered with something like approval.

Then, without even the slightest of explanations to Draco, they disapparated.

Harry was compressed with the familiar, uncomfortable sensation of apparition, and in that fragmented moment Harry's thoughts reeled.

This is it. I am being taken to some dungeon where Percy will be waiting, bloodied and bound, about to be murdered. He is going to make me watch. Percy is going to die, and it is going to be all my fault.

They landed. Soft daylight danced across Harry's eyes.

Instantly, Harry made to turn on the spot, but Voldemort did not release his arm. Harry looked around him, held in place as he was, and was confused at what he saw.

Outside. They were outside, they were somewhere that Harry recognized vaguely… There were woods in the distance and the sky was a mixture of intense indigo and purple—the violet brighter than any color Harry had ever seen in the sky in his life—but whether it was sunrise or sunset, Harry was unsure…

More important than where they were, though, was the fact that they were alone. Harry looked up at Voldemort questioningly.

He did not look furious. He did not look as though he were on the verge of murdering someone in an incensed rampage. Even his magic was oddly still.

…*Why?*

Had he really not thought to torture someone in order to punish his rebellious, human horcrux? Afraid to voice what he thought was an obvious concern on the off chance that Voldemort had *not* thought to do this, Harry remained silent. Voldemort's magic was glistening. It looked more like the sky than the actual sky did; a star-scape against a backdrop of bleeding purple and blue. Towards the west, the barest pinpricks of stars were visible, but they paled in comparison to the glints of gold in Voldemort's swarming aura.

Voldemort gave Harry a sweeping, appraising look. He seemed to be waiting for something.

"Breathe," he repeated, his command a bit sharper this time. Then, when Harry looked baffled, "*slower*."

Was he breathing that quickly? Harry put one hand to his chest and he realized that yes, yes he was. Putting forth a great deal of self-control for such a simple action, Harry closed his eyes and took a slow, steadying breath, and then another, and then another.

Voldemort released his arm.

When he opened his eyes again, it was to see that the Dark Lord was no longer watching him but walking away. He moved several paces from Harry before sitting, rather casually, on the ground where fresh, young grass had begun to grow. He sat facing the violet half of the sky, his legs crossed and his back ramrod straight. He turned towards

Harry and, nodding at the space by his side, said "Sit."

Harry was more confused than ever. Voldemort's magic and disposition were both calm—eerily so. Rather than reassure him, this filled Harry with a great sense of foreboding.

What kind of new trick was this?

At Harry's hesitation, Voldemort's magic flickered in annoyance. Unable to see a way out of this ploy, whatever it was, Harry sat next to him as instructed—though he left a healthy gap between them.

Voldemort was quiet for a long time. Harry waited, trying to breathe properly and slowly.

"…Do you have any idea how your heart haunts me?"

Harry stared, sure he must have invented that statement spoken in the detached, cold voice of Lord Voldemort. He was still looking up, away from Harry, his magic simmering about him.

"Your feelings, your torrid emotions… I feel them often. Even suppressed by Occlumency, they constantly flicker on the edges of my mind, especially when you are distraught. Earlier this very day, I felt one with precision. *Outside*. That thought and the recollection that the last time you had been outside was when you fell to me in the Forbidden Forest… But you were wrong."

Harry held his breath and waited. He felt like he was edging along the side of a cliff, and at any moment something would snap, causing an avalanche of viciousness.

"I brought you here. The last time you were outside was here, precisely here… That was not a memory."

Harry looked towards the horizon, and that was when it hit him—Finland, of course, this was northern Finland… Only it looked so different. It was not night but twilight… The aurora borealis were not currently flooding the sky, which was now a blanket of purple and blue…

But of course Harry had not thought of that moment as the last time he'd been outside. He'd been convinced he was in a memory even as it was happening.

Still, Harry was baffled as to why Voldemort was saying this and why

they were here. Why was he so calm, what was he getting at? Harry was convinced that this situation would take a turn at any moment, and he prepared himself for the worst.

"I thought it my own madness at first… your whirlwind of a soul," Voldemort continued. "I thought it must be the repercussions of going without a corporal form for so long; I assumed it was merely a disturbing side effect from the ritual which gained me a solid, if pathetic, body… Random bursts of emotion that had no connection with anything I was doing… Why would I feel a strange surge of happiness when I had nothing to be joyful over, when I was still in such a fragile and pathetic state? Why should I feel anxiety when I was safely hidden behind wards and enchantments, Nagini's protective form coiled around me? I thought it was only because that small body was so unstable. I told myself the bizarre, mysterious emotions would end once I took your blood and was reborn as something stronger… But I was wrong. They became worse."

Harry's heart thundered in his ears. He had once more stopped breathing altogether, unwittingly fascinated.

He had never considered that the Dark Lord might have been feeling his emotions, too…

"I felt them more often and more powerfully. Pangs of pure grief that I had never once experienced in my own life, searing hatred that was not related to anything I was doing… I once felt the sensation of someone's lips being pressed to mine and tears staining my cheeks… I felt the ghost of pain on the back of my hand, could feel blood dripping from a wound that was not there… I felt *vicious*… Madness, I told myself. This is *madness*."

He faced Harry, his magic glinting in a disturbing yet gorgeous manner. "But I was wrong yet again. I was not suffering from madness as I secretly feared… I was *feeling you*."

Harry was unable to hold his silence any longer. He wasn't sure what grand and profound point the Dark Lord was trying to make and he didn't much care, not when he was so distraught. "What is this?" he blurted out. "What are you doing, why are we here, what's happening —what did you do to Percy—"

Harry shouted his name before he could stop himself. His hand flew to his mouth, and Voldemort tilted his head to one side. He looked surprised.

…But his magic revealed other emotions. Voldemort's aura darkened at the word *Percy* in a menacing way, and Harry knew without a doubt that Percy Weasley had not been forgotten by Lord Voldemort. "Percy Weasley?" he asked, sounding so convincingly nonchalant that Harry was sure he would have otherwise believed it. "Why would I do anything to Percy Weasley?"

"Because—because he questioned you in court, and because you're s-so…"

Harry's words trailed off, suddenly too uncomfortable to say more. The thought was there in his mind, but his jaw froze, unable to voice it.

Because you're so angry that I can keep this sense of wholeness from you. Because I threatened to do just that when your hungry tongue could glean nothing *from my unwilling mouth.*

And that was something, wasn't it? The way that neither he nor Voldemort had actually put into words the pleasant warmth that bloomed between them because of the shared fragment of Voldemort's soul. It was possibly the most powerful, beautiful thing that Harry had ever felt, that light—and it was *certainly* the most wonderful thing that the Dark Lord had experienced since he'd first shredded his soul with Dark Magic—but it was a connection that went unspoken.

Harry thought he understood why.

It was such an intimate bond, one that neither of them had wanted nor anticipated, and neither of them wanted to admit that it was real… despite how ostentatiously *real* it was. To utter the pleasure of the connection between them out loud was nearly impossible, it was so… uncomfortable.

Voldemort's magic whirled but his expression remained light. Harry already knew that this distressing fact remained truer for the Dark Lord than it did for him. Voldemort would *never* admit that he was infatuated—*addicted*—to the light of Harry's soul. The Dark Lord would *never* admit that Harry held something within him that made him feel peaceful and warm and whole, because to do such a thing would be to admit that he was, at least on some small level, wrong.

Lord Voldemort would *never* confess that having murdered so many innocent people to shatter his soul was *wrong*.

"…Percy Weasley did nothing *wrong* by making his arguments,"

Voldemort eventually said. "He thought that he was correct. He repeated my own words. He is uninformed of the full complications of your predicament, of course, but he had every right to speak. Why would I feel wrathful towards a wizard who was pardoned under my own ruling? Those would not be the reactions of a just and level-headed ruler."

Harry was astounded. His words were so carefully spoken, his expression so sincere, but his magic—his magic had darkened tremendously, and Harry knew that Voldemort felt nothing but ire in his heart for Percy Weasley.

Was that all this was to him, then? Proving Harry wrong? Trying to show that he wasn't a madman when Harry *knew* that the opposite was true?

Harry wasn't sure, but he did know that if that was the only reason Voldemort had not instantly acted on his impulse to harm someone, it was a temporary respite at best. "You're lying," Harry said, no longer caring if he seemed more perceptive than he should. His heart thumped against his ribcage like it was trying to escape. "You're lying, you wanted to kill Percy the moment he spoke against you and you want to kill him now! And you probably will at any moment, just because you can, just because—"

Harry's outcry was silenced. In a movement that was unsettlingly swift, Voldemort grabbed Harry about the waist and pulled him towards him, and before Harry even had the presence of mind to register what was happening, his legs were spread and his jaw and was in the Dark Lord's hands and—

"This must *end*."

…Harry was sitting on his lap.

Harry blinked, thinking he might be imagining things, but no—Voldemort had just grabbed him and settled him rather jarringly *onto his lap* so that Harry was *straddling* him. Voldemort grabbed his face with one hand so that Harry was for once looking down at the Dark Lord's face rather than up into it under his tall, towering form.

Harry's panic was effectively derailed to say the least. His legs were on either side of the Dark Lord's hips; their chests were separated by barely more than a few layers of fabric. Harry was so close to Voldemort's face that he could count his lashes if he wanted; he could feel his words against his face as he spoke them.

"This panic must stop. Your friends are safe. Anyone who is dear to you is safe. If they are alive now and they have been pardoned then they are under my protection. This constant panicking for their safety is *debilitating* and *unnecessary* and it must *end*."

Harry ignored the fact that he was in such an intimate, physical position with Voldemort and forced himself to focus on what he was saying. "They're not safe at all," he said, incredulous that he had to even make such an argument. "You made that perfectly clear yourself —you'll hurt anyone to punish me, y-you've already—"

"No longer."

Voldemort's magic softened. Harry had never seen it quite so glittery as it was now, the gold sparkling almost blindingly. "I swear to you, from this moment on, that they are safe… No one else needs to die. No one else needs to suffer."

Rather than reassure him, Harry felt his disbelief spike. "Until I do something to piss you off again, or—or one of them says or does something to defy you that's grave enough—and they will, because they *don't* support you and your ideals and they never really will and —"

Harry's statement was cut off by a sudden onslaught of his own emotion. Voldemort's magic darkened uncomfortably; even his expression, which was usually such a carefully controlled mask, cracked just a hair.

"And Hermione will figure it out."

Harry wrenched his face from Voldemort's grasp. He thought to try and move away but found that his body wouldn't listen. Words were streaming out of his mouth before he could manage it, anyway.

"Hermione will figure it out," he repeated, and it was only as he spoke that he realized the weight of his own statement. It was a fear that had been forming in his subconscious since the moment Hermione had first arrived at Malfoy Manor, since she had looked at Harry's frightening, crimson eyes and not said a word about them.

"Hermione is too smart, she will figure it out, she will find out that I'm a h-h—"

"Hermione Granger knows exactly what you are."

Harry stared, certain he'd misheard him.

"What did you think I was looking for in her mind when she first came to me, to us?" Voldemort said. "She knows. She has known for some time, truthfully, though she did not accept it as a reality until very recently."

Harry was beside himself. He barely noticed when Voldemort moved one hand to rest against his neck. "Wh-what do you mean?"

"Hermione Granger became suspicious that you may be a horcrux of mine on the day that the two of you escaped Godric's Hollow… She sat and tended to you for hours afterwards as you writhed, unconscious yet moaning, *hissing*… She wiped the sweat from your face and watched as, when your eyes would occasionally flash open, she swore she saw scarlet in the usual green of your irises…

"But no, she convinced herself that it could not be true. Surely Dumbledore would have known? Surely he would have figured out long ago that you were a horcrux if that were the case? And if he had known, Dumbledore would never do something as conniving as intentionally keep that from you for his own purposes… would he?"

Voldemort's voice was not smug nor condescending; he said it all in a soft, neutral tone. "She convinced herself that it could not be true—that the unheard of connection between us was just the repercussions of dark magic and nothing more. She knew that she was wrong the moment she heard your voice on the *Potterwatch* broadcast. For what other reason would I have for keeping you alive?

"And so she came. A night full of contemplation, but she made her choice to come in the end. To fight me meant to murder you, and she would not do that. Her loyalty to you is unprecedented. I once may have said that friendship was dangerous, that to have faith in anyone was idiotic… but it would appear that in this instance I was wrong. Hermione Granger's unwavering friendship to you was her saving grace. She would never do anything to betray or endanger you… Therefore, her loyalty now also belongs to me."

"She… she knows?" Harry asked stupidly once he had finished. Voldemort nodded. "She knows… Hermione knows…"

Voldemort's expression and magic suddenly became distraught again. It took Harry a moment to realize why; his body had begun reacting before his brain could catch up.

Crying… he was crying…

Silent tears were streaming down his face, and it was with that comprehension that Harry was hit with a debilitating sense of relief.

His repressed fears came bubbling to the surface. Deep, deep down, Harry had been afraid that Hermione would soon learn what he was, and that she would someday turn on him, determined to kill him because that was the only way, the only way…

But now, as the truth came out that this was not the case—that Hermione knew what he was and wanted him to live anyway, that she would not forsake him for something he had never wanted to be—Harry's buried anxiety was washed away, and the rush of gratitude he felt towards her was so strong that he was crying because of it.

They were tears of relief.

Voldemort didn't seem to understand. His magic was tense and his hand went rigid against his neck. Harry got the distinct impression that the Dark Lord would like nothing more than to be as far away from Harry's display of emotion as possible.

But Voldemort could not run from his horcrux's emotions even if he wanted to.

Harry wiped the unbidden tears away. "Ron?" he choked out, needing to know. "Does Ron know?"

"…No. He does not know, and Hermione Granger is sworn to secrecy… I see no reason for Ronald Weasley to be aware."

Harry just nodded and hid his face in his hands, not wanting to begin the discussion as to what would happen if Ron did find out. He didn't see how that could last forever. Ron was also aware that Voldemort had made horcruxes…

Voldemort didn't breech the subject, either. He reached with both arms and pulled Harry's hands away from his face, shockingly gentle. "This must end," he said quietly but firmly. "I will not harm anyone you care about. They are safe."

"You aren't happy about that."

Harry voice turned spiteful. "You aren't. You wanted to curse Percy right then and you still want to now. You want to torture anyone who

displeases you. Just like you tortured me so many times, just like you've tortured and killed so many others."

Voldemort stared at Harry's incensed, tear-stained face for a long moment. Harry fully expected him to lie, to make some comment about being level-headed and just yet again… and was very surprised when he did not.

"Yes," he admitted in a cold hiss, his magic dark. Harry's skin crawled at the feeling. "I do. My instant reaction is always to cause pain. I wanted nothing more than to skin Percy Weasley alive for the mere suggestion that you could be taken from me."

Voldemort's hands tightened on Harry's wrists like living shackles. "But I did not act on the impulse. I may have the gut reaction to strike and kill when one opposes me, but those urges do not matter so long as I do not act on them… We all have individual, visceral reactions, do we not? I cannot control my instincts to wish to *kill* any more than you can control your instincts which demand that you try and *save*…"

His dark magic lightened slightly, once more glittering with gold. "Because that is what you do, isn't it, Harry?" he murmured. "You always want to *save* people…"

"And you don't," Harry agreed tensely, ignoring the way Voldemort's magic had begun to shine. "Since when do you take your time to thoughtfully consider whether you should punish someone? You hurt people all the time without thinking—I would know. I saw the way you treated your followers through your own eyes multiple times throughout the years. You curse and kill people without consideration."

Rather than make him angry, this statement only served to make Voldemort's magic glisten more. "For a time, I did," he agreed, "but that was when I had only recently regained a body. You think that was how I acted before? Fourteen years as something less than a ghost… changed me. I had been shattered. I was burdened with some emotions that were mine and some which weren't, and I thought that if it was madness that plagued me then it should plague the world… I felt *broken*."

The last word caused his smooth and tenuous voice to break. Harry was shocked at the intensity in his eyes, at the way his magic flashed… *Need*, he was suddenly consumed by a deep-seated *need*, and Voldemort's hands were so tight around Harry's wrists that it bordered

on painful.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of, nor embarrassed about… I understand."

Voldemort's magic was rushing in a whirlwind of desperate emotions. It made Harry's heart ache even as he grappled to understand what he was talking about.

"I'm sorry you've lost that." Voldemort's words were heavy, his voice low in a way that Harry had never heard before. The sensation of desperation in his magic soared. Black and gold. "I'm sorry that you became this…"

Realization struck Harry like a bolt of lightning. Voldemort was… He was reciting Harry's own words back to him, from back when he had been blinded, woken up in a state of desperation by the Dark Lord himself… The one time Harry had begged him for anything…

Don't leave me.

A torrential wave of guilt washed over him. Harry *had* said that. He had said that he was sorry for what the Dark Lord had become, had even said that his desire to feel whole again was nothing shameful…

And then he had gone and kept it from him in a moment of viciousness.

He knew his guilt was unwarranted. Harry knew that what he had done in that situation was understandable, if bold—Voldemort had just twisted his entire life story to fit his agenda in public, had turned him into some sad little victim and made his mother out to be a terrible, vindictive woman…

And yet he felt guilty, anyway. Voldemort's magic was undulating with a fierce need that was so raw and pleading that it tugged at his heart strings and—

This was just another manipulation.

A small but very present part of Harry's mind spoke up, a dark voice lurking in the corners of his psyche. *This, right here, is another manipulation. Rather than get you to do what he wants through threats to torture your friends—which* inconveniences *him because of your* emotions*—he is using another tactic. He knows you, and he's just said it himself—you're Harry Potter, you have a saving people thing. He's used this against you before. He's using it against you now.*

Only this time, it was Voldemort himself Harry was being guilted into saving… Though saving from what, precisely, was questionable. Merely from feeling broken? From that horrid sensation of coldness?

Or was he, Harry Potter… could he perhaps *save the Dark Lord's soul* through this light that bound them?

Voldemort's eyes were searing into his as Harry's mind raced with these thoughts. His usually crimson irises looked more lilac than scarlet under the brightly colored sky; a violent violet that was full of longing.

"I'm sorry that you never knew love…"

Harry thought at first that it was his own body that had begun to shake again, but no. It was *Voldemort's* hands that had begun to tremble around his wrists.

Harry's heart was breaking and he hated that it was happening. The small, dark voice in the corner of his mind fought against the inevitable—it screamed at him to remember that this man had done this to himself, he had killed his parents and Neville and he was the reason that Sirius and Remus and Tonks and so many, many others were dead—he should deny him the feeling of a whole, pure soul because he did not deserve it, he was a *monster*—

But then Voldemort spoke again, and the spiteful voice was silenced.

"I'm sorry."

…Was he still just repeating his own words back to him? Harry would have thought so without question were it not for the Dark Lord's magic enveloping itself around him. Harry felt like he was being swathed in constellations. And… it was not remorse that was cradling him from all sides, no…

But it was something like it.

The tiniest glimmer of warmth flickered between them. The irrefutable bond of their souls sparking to life, but it only lasted for a second before dissipating.

A request.

Harry knew he was being manipulated, he *knew* it… but he let it happen anyway. He said nothing, only looked at Voldemort and

nodded.

Light, lovely and all-encompassing, bloomed between them. Voldemort's eyelids fluttered and closed, blessed relief exuding from his aura. His head fell against Harry's chest and his arms wrapped around his waist, the warmth so strong that Harry felt like he was floating up into the twilight sky.

Unthinking, Harry did something he had never done before. He ran his fingers through Voldemort's hair in the same manner that the Dark Lord always did to him, his smooth, wavy locks that reached just a few inches beneath his chin. Voldemort allowed it, his grip around Harry's waist tightening and the beautiful warmth escalating. Harry could feel it radiating from his very core all the way to his fingertips, where he carded them through the Dark Lord's hair like silent promises.

Rationally, no, Harry did not think Voldemort's soul could be saved. The Dark Lord had done too many terrible things, he had hurt too many… He was probably too damaged and broken…

But Harry was stupid enough to try.

Voldemort clung to his body and the light of his soul like a starving man. Harry let him bask in it, uncaring that he was a big-hearted fool, because that was who he was, and he did not know how to be anything else.

Even if the Dark Lord was irredeemable, even if his words were nothing but echoes of Harry's own; more damning, cunning manipulations…

"…I'm sorry."

Even if he did not know for what or to whom he was apologizing.

Midnight

Midnight. Every night you are to be here, in this room, alone. *Do not be late. I will not wait.*

Midnight.

These were the cryptic, softly spoken instructions that Voldemort had left Harry with before disappearing from his bedroom, not even waiting for his captive to agree. Harry was more than a little annoyed by that, but do course he understood why. The Dark Lord didn't need to hear his acceptance.

He already knew he had it.

Every night before midnight, Harry was to be back in this room with too many mirrors at the far end of Malfoy Manor… alone.

Harry felt like his life was turning into a dark and twisted fairy tale.

He sighed heavily and fell onto his bed, staring at his reflection above him. He looked and felt exhausted. He wondered how long he and Voldemort had sat beneath that twilight sky before the Dark Lord had brought him back to Malfoy Manor. It had not seemed like very long. But then again, time felt warped while under the influence of that blissful warmth.

Harry closed his eyes, ignoring the strange, fluttery feeling in his stomach as he trailed his hands over his chest, recalling how Voldemort's arms had felt wound around his waist. He had felt so warm, his magic had been so lovely and glistening… And that light, as always, had made Harry feel like he was floating…

Floating…

Harry was not on a bed in Malfoy Manor, but atop a fluffy, white cloud. He was floating through the sky, a gentle, pleasantly warm breeze rustling his hair. The sun had set, and Harry looked up into the beauty of the star-strewn sky above him, scanning the heavens intently.

He quickly found what he was looking for—the brightest, most vibrant star in the sky. "'Lo, Sirius," he murmured, waving.

He did not expect a response. To Harry's great surprise, the brightest

star brightened even further, flickering and twinkling like a celestial wink.

"Don't forget," came the familiar tenor of Sirius's voice. Harry sat up, his feeling of contentedness dissipating.

"Sirius?" Harry shouted, hardly daring to believe what he had heard. "Is that really you?"

The star flicked again. "Don't forget what he is, Harry."

Another gust of wind stirred the air, but this time it was icy and cold. Harry shivered as chills shook his spine, a dark feeling settling over him. The cloud beneath him felt like it was getting thinner. Harry looked down on it with dread; it *was*, the cloud was dissolving beneath him, he could feel himself slipping through it, into it—he was going to fall—

"Don't forget."

"Sirius!" Harry shouted, trying to stand to see if he could escape, but it was pointless—there was nowhere to go but down.

"Don't forget."

The cloud vanished, and Harry went plummeting towards the earth—he fell from the heavens, his screams swallowed by the cold air rushing past him.

Down, down, down…

Harry woke with a jolt.

His heart was pounding and he was broken out in a cold sweat, but the dream he had been having—it had been so visceral!—was already fading. He bit his lower lip, trying to remember…

It was gone. Harry sat up and shook his head, deciding it was probably better that he could not recall whatever his nightmare had been. He looked around at the bed he was on in confusion. He did not remember taking his shoes off, nor getting under the covers…

Harry tossed the blankets aside and stood in a panic. How long had he been out this time? He glanced at the clock and gaped—it was eleven. Harry rushed to the door, heading towards the foyer. What was wrong with him, napping with everything that was going on…?

Harry walked briskly through the halls, ignoring the curious looks that portraits gave him as he passed. He paused only when he came to the bay window overlooking the gardens, where he stared, slack-jawed at the sight that greeted him.

Daylight. He had thought that it was eleven at night when he'd looked at the clock in his room, but he could see now that he was wrong. It was morning. He had not slept for a few hours, but all night, well into the morning!

Harry ran. A few painted renditions of Malfoy ancestors scoffed as he went, but Harry hardly cared. He'd slept all night; any number of terrible things could have happened in that time…

He turned a corner and barreled right into Ron. Ron's magic brightened, and he nearly fell backwards with the force of how hard Harry had collided with him. It was a testament to how on edge they were that they both screamed, which in turn caused the portrait nearest to them to scream as well—a blonde witch who looked to be from the Victorian era. She dropped her feather fan and ran out of her frame, fleeing to another.

"Sorry!" Harry shouted as Ron clutched at his chest, looking as taken aback as Harry felt. "Are you all right?"

"Barely," Ron muttered. "I was just coming to see if *you* were all right. You've taken to sleeping in, I see."

Harry face grew warm. He wasn't sure why he slept for so long when he did. Maybe he was still making up for a sleep debt…

"Sorry," Harry repeated, mumbling this time. "What's happened? What's going on? Where is Hermione?"

Hermione. The moment Harry said her name, he realized how badly he wanted to speak to her in private.

She knew what he was…

"Gone," Ron said sourly. "She's been gone all morning. *Summoned* again…"

His magic darkened to a rust colored hue, heavy around him. "Oh," said Harry. "I, er, supposed you don't know what for?"

"No. She just had to go…"

"Is… Is everything okay? With you two?"

Harry knew it was a ridiculous question; nothing was okay at all, with any of them, but he had to ask. Ron's face reddened and he looked to the floor.

"Er… Yeah, we're… We're okay," he said. He scratched the back of his head. "Guess we better be, seeing as we're getting married in exactly a week."

Which was what Harry had *wanted* to ask, but didn't think it would be wise to state his question so bluntly. "Yeah," he said. "I forgot to say it before, but, uh… Congratulations!"

There was a beat of silence, and then they were both grinning despite themselves. "Not the circumstances I would have imagined," Ron said, "but I'm still happy about that one aspect of my life. You wouldn't believe what I had to do last night though, Harry. After—after Hermione and I, er, *talked"*—his face turned a much brighter red, and his magic quivered erratically—"I realized I had to tell my family. My *mother*. Preferably before our engagement was, you know, announced in *The Daily Prophet* for the rest of the world to see."

Harry stared at his slightly delirious grin. "Yeah. I had to *write my mum and dad a letter*, telling them about how I'm staying with the Malfoy's of my own free will, and that I'll be busy all week up until then here and at the Ministry, and would she mind sending me my things? And that I'm here with you, and—and my girlfriend who is now my fiancé for a wedding that is happening next week, who I will be marrying in the ancient, traditional wizarding manner… Mrs. Malfoy had to proofread the whole thing— making sure I didn't say anything I wasn't supposed to, I guess—before sending it off with their owl… I expect I'll get a howler back…"

"Did you tell her that Hermione is pregnant?" Harry asked.

"We decided it would probably be best to tell her that bit in person," Ron said. "The letter was already pretty… jarring."

"Ron… what *is* the ancient, traditional wizarding manner for getting married?"

Ron looked conflicted and his magic trembled. "Let's… Let's go sit down, shall we?" he said, sounding falsely casual. "Instead of standing around in the hall; that witch just came back into her frame, and she looks nosy…"

Indeed, the painted blonde woman had reappeared, and she was clearly eavesdropping, hiding most of her face behind her large feather fan. "Well don't run this time!" she barked after them as Harry followed Ron down the hall, snapping her fan shut.

Ron led him along the familiar path which led to the foyer, where, in his typical, sullen fashion, was Draco Malfoy. He was reading a book and sitting at the same table that Harry had seen him at the day before. "Sorry about the company," Ron muttered, and Draco looked up from his book with narrowed eyes, "but I wanted to be near the floo for whenever Hermione gets back, and he wouldn't let me out of his sight… Except for when I said I was going to wake you up."

"Because I didn't feel like getting attacked again," Draco drawled. His gray eyes settled on Harry and he closed his book. "Look who's finally awake. Did you try and strangle Weasley when he woke you up, scarhead?"

"No, just tried to run me over in the hall is all," said Ron cheerfully. "He was already up. Anyway, you can leave if you like Malfoy. We're not going to go anywhere."

Draco scoffed. "Yeah, right. This one will try to floo himself to Salazar knows where if I walk away from this fireplace," Draco said, nodding towards Harry. "I'm staying right here."

Harry glared but didn't bother arguing. He and Ron took a seat, and Draco smirked, his eyes suddenly gleaming. "Here, Potter. This might interest you. This morning's issue of the *Daily Prophet* covers your trial."

Draco slid the current issue of the *Prophet* across the table; Harry didn't touch it. Reading that article was the *last* thing he wanted to do. "No thanks," said Harry darkly.

"Don't worry, Rita Skeeter didn't write it. It's actually pretty dry… but speaking of Skeeter. What *did* you say to her?"

Draco leaned forward with his elbows on the table, magic flashing in curiosity. "That's what I want to know. The author of this article mentioned that you only answered one question on your way to your trial, and that you did so with a 'carefully worded obscenity towards Rita Skeeter'. You weren't supposed to talk to anyone so far as I knew. What did she ask? What did you *say?"*

Harry felt Ron's magic brighten curiously as well. He remembered

how the guards had ushered away the reporters on his way to the lifts, but when he, Harry, had frozen upon hearing the voice of Rita Skeeter, intent on saying something to her, even the guards had paused, curious to hear the Undesirable Number One speak…

"She… er…" Harry cleared his throat, his face flushing. He pondered whether or not he should tell them this, but both Draco and Ron looked so eager that he decided to do it anyway. "She asked me how I felt about there being no dementors for my trial, and… and I told her to go fuck herself."

Ron and Draco stared at him, similar looks of shock on their faces… and then they both broke out into laughter.

"That's amazing," Ron said, beaming. "I can't wait to tell Hermione."

Harry grinned sheepishly. He wasn't sure if he should be proud or ashamed of having said that. He supposed a bit of both.

Though Draco did not offer up similar compliments, he looked amused and perhaps impressed despite his best efforts not to be. With a crooked smile still on his face, he looked to the side and shouted, "Binny!", and the elf appeared with a soft *pop*.

"Well, what would you like?" Draco asked, looking to Harry. "To eat. To drink," he prompted.

"Oh. Ah, tea would be fine. Thank you."

"No," Draco said, the smile sliding from his face. The elf froze mid-bow. "You have to *eat* something too, Potter."

Harry shot him a venomous look. "Fine," he said. "Toast would be lovely if you don't mind, Binny."

"Of course, sir," Binny squeaked. He then disapparated.

Malfoy made a noise as though he were disgusted. *"If you don't mind,"* he repeated in mocking tones, shaking his head. "Honestly…"

Harry ignored him and turned his attention to Ron. "What is the traditional way wizards get married?" he asked. Draco's magic sparked with renewed interest from across the table.

"Er… well," Ron began, looking uncomfortable. "It's, um… more like a magical ritual then it is a normal wedding…"

His voice trailed off. Before Harry could prompt him to continue, Binny reappeared, hovering a tray of toast, butter, jam, and tea not only for Harry but for all of them onto the table. "Thanks," Harry said distractedly, not touching any of it and staring at Ron. "What does that mean, then?"

Draco's magic was growing brighter still, and Harry was sure that he would interrupt at any moment. Ron cleared his throat and said, "Well. It's between two people, you see…"

"I gathered that, Ron, believe it or not," Harry muttered.

"Er—right—and, well… th-there's a Bonder, and those are the only people necessary for the ritual… They're traditionally really small, intimate things, wizarding unions…"

"It's an oath," Draco said, cutting in just as Harry suspected he would. "A blood oath. There's one blade, which is enchanted by the Bonder, and each individual uses that blade to make a cut on the other person, here." He held out his left palm and traced a section of it with the index finger of his right hand. "On the heart line. And while they're making the cut they utter an incantation. Then, once they've both performed the spell on each other, they press their palms together, thus completing the bond with blood."

"Blood magic," Harry said blankly. Ron's magic was twitching anxiously. "And… and there's a Bonder." Ron nodded. "That… sounds an awful lot like an Unbreakable Vow."

"It sure does," Ron said, his voice an octave too high.

"It's so *romantic*," Draco sneered, grinning widely and stirring some sugar into his tea.

"Wait, wait," said Harry, shaking his head. "What does this mean? What is the incantation you have to say?"

"Er… *Habes… Habes con—*"

"*Habes cor meum et animam meam*," Draco recited. "Merlin, Weasley, it's not very long. I do hope you manage to memorize it properly *before* your wedding day…"

Rather than look offended, Ron looked worried. "Me too," he said gravely. "Imagine what kind of nightmare it would be if I said the wrong bloody thing…"

"But what does that mean?" asked Harry. "*Habes cor… cor* whatever—"

"You have my heart and my soul," said Draco loftily, lifting his tea cup. His eyes were glittering with mirth. "It's so *romantic*."

"Shut up Malfoy, you're not the one who has to do it," said Ron, but he did not sound angry as he usually did when speaking to Malfoy—just nervous.

"Well, I will someday, won't I?" Draco said, shrugging.

Harry and Ron both raised a brow at him. "Of course I will. There are a lot of benefits to it, believe it or not, and besides. It's how my parents were married. It's how *most* respectable wizarding couples get married. The ones who give a damn about our magical roots and noble traditions, of course."

"But if this is really like an Unbreakable Vow… What does that mean? What does it do? Are you never able to—to cheat on your spouse, or something? And what happens if you *do*?"

"Don't be so crass, Potter," Malfoy said before taking a sip of tea.

"…Well, *is* that what it does?" Harry asked again, for neither Draco nor Ron answered his questions.

"Of course not," said Draco. "No one would get married that way if it did. It just opens up a sort of emotional connection between the two people getting married. Heightens your sense of empathy towards the other person or something like that."

"Empathy?"

"Yeah. Makes you understand that person more clearly, I guess. I don't know exactly how it feels seeing as I'm not married, but my father said it made it much easier to understand why my mother would react in certain ways. That he comprehends her emotions better, and vice versa. Intimate empathy."

"Oh," Harry said, still not quite understanding. "Well… that doesn't sound so horrible, I guess… But if it's an oath… a blood oath… Can it ever be broken?"

Draco looked genuinely confused by Harry's question. "Like, what if one person in the marriage decided they didn't want to be married any longer? That they didn't like those extra feelings of empathy. Is

divorce even possible?"

Draco went from looking perplexed to irritated. "That's a muggle thing," he muttered.

"What?" Harry shouted. "A *muggle* thing? How can divorce be a *muggle* thing?"

"I've never heard of witches and wizards who are married this way getting *divorced*," Draco said simply.

Harry looked to Ron, whom he expected to argue against Draco. He didn't. "I actually haven't either," he said thoughtfully.

Harry was astounded. "Is it illegal in wizarding society?"

"I don't think so," said Ron. "It's just… not really something that happens much, I don't think."

Harry ran a hand through his hair, messing it up even more than usual. Draco watched him distastefully. "So, these blood oaths are permanent, huh?"

"No one ever said *that*," Draco said, his eyes gleaming. "The blood bond ends if one person in the union dies, of course. You can't be married to a ghost."

Ron laughed nervously, his magic too bright and trembly to mean anything good. Harry looked at him and, in a voice that was impressively casual, Ron asked, "How many husbands did you say Zabini's mother went through, Harry?"

Draco glowered. Harry thought he recalled it being something along the lines of seven but decided instead to answer with, "A… few. But wait, who is your Bonder going to be?"

Ron's whole demeanor darkened. "Take a guess."

"No," Harry gasped. "Not him."

"Yeah."

"Really?"

"*Really."*

Harry leaned back in his chair and let out a long breath. "Wow," he

said. "My best friends are going to get married in Malfoy Manor… in a week… by the *Dark Lord*."

“Yep.”

No one seemed to have anything to add to this unsettling truth. They fell into a long and awkward silence. Draco picked his book back up, Harry quietly ate his toast, and Ron sipped at his tea, occasionally glancing up at the chandelier like he hadn't quite given up hope that it may fall on him.

Binny had just vanished with the dishes when the fireplace flickered to life in a burst of green flames.

It was Hermione. She entered the foyer with her magic swirling in a much healthier manner than Harry had ever seen it, and she was carrying several large bags in her hands. Upon seeing Harry and Ron she smiled.

"Is everything okay?" Ron said at once, jumping to his feet and rushing towards her. "What did he want?"

"Yes, everything is fine," she answered reassuringly, and Harry stood as well. She gave them each a quick hug, which was not an easy feat considering how full her hands were. Draco remained seated, looking looking his typical, annoyed self.

"What did he want?" said Harry, repeating Ron's question.

"What happened to you last night?" Hermione asked instead, giving Harry a pointed look. "You and Malfoy left, and when we went looking for you later, you'd disappeared…"

Harry's mind went blank. Draco's magic was quivering in a strange fashion, and Harry could tell at once that he had not told Hermione and Ron that Voldemort had snatched him away…

"Fell asleep," Harry lied. "Sorry. I just sort of passed out. I didn't mean to, honestly…"

Hermione scrutinized him for a moment, her magic undulating back and forth in suspicious, burgundy waves… but then she smiled. "You probably needed your rest," she said. "I doubt any of us have slept well lately…"

"So what did the Dark Lord want?" Harry asked, desperate to not talk

about himself. As he asked it, he wondered when exactly it had become normal for him to say the Dark Lord rather than you-know-who, or, his preference, Voldemort… And why he was not calling him that now.

He could. Harry was the only one who could say Voldemort's name without triggering the taboo…

"He… wanted to explain a few things to me," Hermione answered. "And I, er, went to St. Mungo's…"

"St. Mungo's?" Ron balked, his magic flashing in panic. "What for? Did something—"

"Nothing happened!" Hermione said quickly. "I just went with Mrs. Malfoy, I picked out a Healer… I have an appointment with her tomorrow. F-for a prenatal exam. Healer Macmillan, she's really great, I think you'll like her… If you want to come with me tomorrow?"

She looked at Ron nervously, who immediately said, "Yes. Of course I want to be there with you."

Hermione smiled, and as she and Ron exchanged an extremely fond, loving look, their magic reacted to each other's—fuzzy, vibrant orange gingerly touching smooth, burgundy waves. Harry felt like he should back slowly out of the room and be nowhere near them, and it was obvious with a single glance towards Draco that he felt the same way.

Perhaps sensing this, Ron cleared his throat. "Er, here, let me take those… What are these?" He took Hermione's bags from her, looking curious.

"Just a few things. I sort of went shopping with Mrs. Malfoy after she took me to St. Mungo's. You weren't exaggerating, Ron, that is an odd experience. She said she's taking you on Monday, Harry, she said that you need robes? She should be here any moment, by the way. And, ah. Harry, did Ron tell you the details of the wedding?"

"Yeah, sort of," Harry answered.

"Oh, good. So… will you be my witness?"

"Sorry? Witness?" Harry raised at brow at Ron, who was now holding all of Hermione's many, heavy-looking bags.

"Didn't explain that bit," Ron said. "I'll just… put these in your

room…"

He shuffled away awkwardly, leaving Harry standing next to Hermione. Draco had hidden behind his book again, looking like he wanted to be anywhere else.

"He explained how the ceremony works, at least?" Hermione asked.

"The basics of it, yeah," Harry said. He was surprised that she did not look more perturbed at the notion of a blood bond. Perhaps she had simply had enough time to accept it.

"So it will be happening here, all of it—this massive reception and the wedding—but the ritual itself is going to be very secluded… Traditionally they only have the three people—the Bonder and the two getting married—but we're each allowed one witness to be in the room with us, and… and Ron has already asked his mother, he had to *owl* her last night about it, can you believe it? They wouldn't let him leave… But anyway… Harry, w-will you be mine?"

Harry stared, noting the way Hermione's magic trembled and her eyes glistened as she looked up at him. It took him a moment to realize why she was asking him, and why she was on the precipice of tears.

Harry was probably the only person Hermione *could* ask. She had no siblings; her parents were in Australia with no clue that they even had a daughter… Her entire family was muggles; of course Lord Voldemort would not allow them to attend…

"O-of course," Harry said, though he had no idea what being a witness entailed. "Absolutely."

Hermione beamed and pulled him into a hug, burying her head in his chest. "Oh, thank you!" she said, her magic swelling with a suffocating emotion. Harry hugged her back as he considered what this meant.

In a week's time, he would be alone in a room with Ron, Hermione, Voldemort, and Mrs. Weasley, watching his best friends perform a blood ritual…

The thought of seeing Mrs. Weasley again made his heart ache… and the thought of everyone else that he would see at this reception afterwards made his stomach twist into knots. Surely the entire pardoned, Weasley family would be there… Bill and Charlie and *Percy* and Fred and George and—

The fireplace once more ignited in green.

Hermione released him. Draco swore under his breath, dropped his book, and jumped up as a slew of people paraded into the foyer.

First was Narcissa Malfoy, followed by no less than six witches and a wizard, all of whom were dressed in long, stylish dress robes. "Welcome to my home," Narcissa announced curtly, and the people surrounded her all made comments along the lines of 'lovely space!', 'such high ceilings!' and 'that chandelier is to *die* for.' They each brandished their wands, and quick-quills and bits of parchments appeared, all of which immediately began taking notes.

"Mother," Draco said, a smile fixed on his face. "Welcome back."

"This is my son, Draco, and our current guest, Mr. Potter."

The group all stared in awe at Harry. Harry waved shyly, but Narcissa spoke again before he needed to say anything. "And this is the lovely bride, Miss Hermione Granger. Hermione, these are the best wedding planners, florists, and decorators that Wizarding Britain has to offer… or so I've been told. Now, where is—? Oh, there."

Ron returned, looking baffled at the group of people who had manifested in the foyer in the few moments he'd been gone. "This is Ronald Weasley, the groom," Narcissa announced. Ron flushed. "Now, the wedding is in one week, so we have much work to do. Hermione, Ron, of course, your input will be valued; we were thinking the reception would be in the rose garden, but we have options… Draco, where is your father? He was supposed to be here."

"H-he went to Diagon Alley," Draco answered. "He said he was going to—er—"

"Meet with that calligraphy artist who should be sending out the invitations by owl later today, I hope?" she said, her usual navy magic flashing dangerously.

"Yes," Draco said at once. "That's exactly what he said."

"Good." Narcissa then turned to her group of wedding planners, most of whom were still blatantly staring at Harry. Narcissa noticed this and snapped her fingers, drawing their attention to her. "I'll give you all a tour of the gardens and the manor, so we can decide which location would be most suitable. There are going to be three hundred people at this event, so keep this in mind as we look… Ron and

Hermione will of course accompany us; Harry, Draco, you're welcome to join if you like."

"Actually, mother," Draco said, "I just told Harry that I would show him to our infirmary. He said he has a bit of a headache, and I didn't want to be rude and leave him with the house-elf when he's still gathering his bearings…"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione all gawked at him. He had called him Harry, and he had said it in such a charming, convincing voice. Narcissa and the group of wedding planners didn't seem to notice their confusion though, and they instead cast the youngest Malfoy admiring looks. "That's sweet of you, Draco. Of course," Narcissa said. "But don't be gone too long, I'll have work for you later. Right. Come along, everyone."

She walked away, motioning for the planners, Hermione, and Ron to follow her. Hermione bravely did, but as she reached for Ron's hand, Ron turned and looked over his shoulder. He shot Harry a desperate and unhappy look, like he was being dragged off to a torture session. Harry almost laughed.

"Come on, Harry," Draco said with the most dazzling smile Harry had ever seen gracing his pointed features. They were still within earshot of the others. "Let's get you something for that headache."

Harry said nothing as he nonetheless allowed Draco to guide him away from the foyer. "Your son is such a lamb," he heard one of the witches say behind them, to which Narcissa agreed.

"What," Harry muttered as soon as they were down the hall, "was *that*?"

The fake smile slid from Malfoy's face. "That was me getting us both out of a very painful afternoon. You're welcome."

Harry didn't see why getting a tour would have been painful; if anything, he would have appreciated being shown around this massive manor and the gardens outside. "Do you really have an infirmary in this house? Because I don't have a headache."

"Of course we do, but I'm not taking you there," Draco said. He was walking quickly as they turned a corner into another corridor. "I have to go to Diagon Alley now and find whoever the calligraphy artist is…"

"What? Why?"

"Because I just lied for my father and now I have to cover his arse. Try and keep up, Potter."

Draco stopped directly in front of a large painting of a what Harry thought must be the entryway to this very manor.

"Why *are* you covering for him?" Harry asked suspiciously. "If he just disappears and leaves you here when your mother is stressed out, planning things?"

"Because if I do, then he owes me."

"Do you… *blackmail* your father, Malfoy?"

"Well, it sounds ugly when you put it like that," Draco said. "But trust me. It all works out in the end. We're a family of snakes, what can I say? I was probably going to sneak out of here the moment my mother was back, anyway—"

"But we just left the foyer with the connection to the floo network."

Draco smirked. "*Please*. There's more than one way out of this manor aside from the floo or walking out the front door. This is an old, magical house, made by wizards. I bet it has more hidden passages and rooms than Hogwarts."

Still smirking at Harry, Draco reached up with one hand and… knocked on the door in the painting. When he did, it made a rapping noise that sounded very much as though he had just struck a wooden door, not a canvas. "I'm going to Diagon Alley," Draco announced to no one.

The door swung open.

"No way," Harry said, staring in awe as Draco stepped *into* the frame.

Draco's smile widened even more, his magic bright and merry. "Don't get too excited Potter, it wouldn't work for you. *You're* not a Malfoy," he said, one foot in the frame, one still firmly in the corridor with Harry. "This whole house has secret passages that are enchanted to only react to witches and wizards with Malfoy blood in their veins… And those who have gone through blood oath with a Malfoy, of course. So, unless you plan on trying to marry *me*, you're shit out of luck."

Malfoy laughed at Harry's expression, which must have been some mixture of revolted and angry. "You're just going to leave me here, then?" Harry shouted, incredulous. "Just like that?"

"No, not just like that. *Binny*!"

The elf appeared, bowing. "Make sure Potter doesn't go within ten feet of the fireplace in the foyer, or even try to step foot out of this manor." Malfoy's eyes gleamed vindictively. "If he *does* try to leave, punish yourself *severely*."

The elf trembled and fell into another bow, and for the first time, Harry noticed it—just barely. A spark of magic emanating around Binny.

He'd never noticed magic around an elf before.

It was gone as soon as he'd perceived it. Trying not to let himself get distracted by this insight, Harry glowered at Malfoy. "You're such an arse."

"Have a lovely day," he said brightly in response. Harry barely resisted the urge to grab him by the shoulders and throw him to the ground—the knowledge that Draco had a wand and he did not the only thing keeping him from doing so.

Then he was gone. The painted door closed behind him, and when Harry ran his hands over it curiously, it felt like canvas to him.

Great, Harry thought sourly. He looked down to the tiny elf, who had watched the way Harry's hand touched the painted like he was terrified he might try and make it work for him… and then be forced to punish himself severely.

"I'm not going to leave," Harry said reassuringly.

What he *was* going to do, he had no idea. "Take me to the library?" he said, unable to come up with anything else.

The elf nodded, grasped Harry's hand, and the two disappeared on the spot.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully.

Harry didn't see Draco nor Narcissa again—and, unsurprisingly, there was no sign of Lucius Malfoy, either. He only saw Ron and Hermione

when, many hours later, long after Binny had thoughtfully brought him dinner, they found him in the library. Harry had made himself quite comfortable, sitting in a chair next to the roaring fire that Binny had conjured for him, lost in a torrid, murder-mystery novel. It had been surprisingly relieving, getting lost in somebody else's fictional problems.

"Well?" said Harry when they entered, closing the book. "How did *that* go?"

They shared despairing looks. "Malfoy wasn't joking about his mother being a nightmare," Ron said bluntly.

"She was nice enough to us," said Hermione, "but she was pretty awful to some of those poor planners… and they haven't even done anything yet… She's gone again now, I think she went to track her husband down…"

Harry snorted. "Draco will probably tell her he's off doing something else important…"

"Draco?" Ron said questionably. He plopped down on the sofa across from Harry, and Hermione began perusing the bookshelf nearest to her. "Are we all on a friendly, first-name basis, then?

"No, not really, but it gets confusing with them *all* being Malfoys."

"Narcissa insists that I call her by her first name," Hermione said, her still eyes scanning the books. "She told Ron to call her that as well…"

"Oh. Yeah, I guess I do, too." Harry took a moment to appreciate how odd that was. To be on a first name basis with Narcissa, only to still refer to her son as Malfoy…

Hermione seemed not to hear him. "Wow, this library is large, isn't it?" she said, turning a corner and looking around appreciatively. "Look at all these books on dark magic…"

"Books on dark magic? In Malfoy Manor? I'm shocked," Ron drawled from where he sat. He looked like he was half asleep already; Harry could tell by the way his magic was settling around him that he was tired.

And maybe, for all that had happened to them over the past few days, they should discussed a thousand different hopes and fears, but they didn't. Hermione selected a number of books for herself and sat next

to Ron, immediately losing herself in one; Harry continued with his, and Ron dozed off, leaning on Hermione's shoulder. Once it was clear by his magic (as well as his slack face, where he began drooling) that Ron was dead asleep, Harry considered breeching the subject that he most desperately wanted to discuss with Hermione—that of his being a human horcrux of Lord Voldemort's—but he just couldn't do it. It was so blissfully calm in the library that he couldn't bring himself to ruin it.

With nothing but the sound of the crackling flames and Ron's light snores, they might have been back in the Gryffindor common room, the last ones up as they sat in their favorite, squishy chairs by the fire.

It wasn't difficult to get away before midnight.

Narcissa came to check on them before it got too late, informing Ron that his mother had written a letter back to him, as well as sent a parcel with some of his clothes and other things. It had certainly woken Ron up, who had snatched the letter in a state of mild panic of what her response might be. At least it wasn't a howler.

In fact, the letter was very short. It only said that she was so happy, and that she and the rest of the Weasley family couldn't wait to see them all the following Saturday.

Harry wondered what she was *really* thinking.

Regardless, it had been simple enough to leave with Narcissa after that. Harry bid his friends good night, and Narcissa accompanied Harry to his room. She informed him that he had clean pajamas laying out for him as well as more robes in the wardrobe, but that she would be taking him shopping on Monday to buy him all new things.

The thought of going shopping with Narcissa Malfoy was both frightening and exciting. Knowing he would have to deal with people in public was anxiety-inducing—if the way the wedding planners had reacted to him was anything to go by, he would be stared at more than ever before—but the ability to finally leave Malfoy Manor to go somewhere other than the Ministry was too tempting to possibly pass up.

It was with this somewhat cheery thought in mind that Harry was dropped off at his room. The bedroom which was far from his friend's, with its deep green wallpaper, freshly made bed, and numerous mirrors…

It was only eleven.

Harry spotted the pajamas laying out—emerald-colored and silky—and wondered if they were Draco's, too. Probably. He also wondered whether he should put them on or not before Voldemort showed up, to…

To *what*, exactly? Harry wasn't sure what the Dark Lord would do when he arrived… other then bask in the connection between their souls, of course.

Realizing that he'd been wearing his current clothes for almost two days straight, Harry decided that he should change. This only led him to realizing that he should maybe shower again, too, and suddenly Harry found himself getting very anxious indeed about the fact that Lord Voldemort would be arriving in his bedroom in less than an hour.

Harry knew he shouldn't care if he was clean and presentable for Voldemort. It didn't matter. It wasn't important.

He showered anyway.

Harry was glad he did; letting the warm water and soapy suds wash over him made him feel much calmer. He told himself that this had been his rationale all along as he stepped out of the marble basin, dried off, and went into the bedroom. He quickly dressed in his borrowed night clothes that were, admittedly, very comfortable. The color reminded him of the dress robes that Mrs. Weasley had once bought him.

To bring out your green eyes, she had said.

It was a shame that this was no longer the case.

Forcing himself not to dwell on such sad thoughts, Harry checked the time. It was now only ten minutes until midnight. Somehow, Harry had a feeling that Voldemort was the sort of person who would arrive precisely when he said he would.

He sat on the edge of his bed and waited. He closed his eyes. Harry took a deep breath, attempting to empty his mind, to think of nothing…

A deep breath in, a deep breath out…

Think of nothing, think of no one…

Harry waited…

Breathe…

The clock struck twelve, and he appeared with the softness of a whisper.

Harry felt the Dark Lord's magic dance across his eyelids, simultaneously more and less apparent to him with his eyes closed. He could not see the flecks of gold glittering within the shroud of Voldemort's darkness, but he could feel them. Pinpricks of light that pulsed with a restrained but steady *want*. Voldemort's magic saturated the air. Harry inhaled slowly through his mouth and he thought, *this must be what midnight tastes like.*

Not wanting to make it obvious that Harry knew Voldemort was present, he continued to breathe deeply, feigning practicing Occlumency. Voldemort didn't make a sound when he moved, but Harry could feel him, sensing his magic which glistened as he moved. He was behind him, then to his side, then in front of him…

Directly in front of him… But still he did not speak, and still Harry did not open his eyes… He waited…

Then there was a flicker of warmth, and Harry could pretend that he was ignorant no longer. Harry allowed it, letting the light and warmth bloom between them.

Harry opened his eyes just as Voldemort moved closer, making the bed dip to one side as he sat next to Harry, so close their legs were touching. Harry's heart skipped a beat when Voldemort, smiling, placed one hand around Harry's neck and murmured, *"Good boy."*

Harry didn't have the presence of mind to be embarrassed nor annoyed. At those words, the buoyant light increased dramatically. Harry's eyes fluttered shut and he fell against the Dark Lord's chest, who let out a low and satisfied sound when Harry's head nestled in the crook of his shoulder, the light escalating beautifully.

He's using you, the very small and dark voice somewhere in the recesses of Harry's mind said. *He's using you.*

I know, Harry thought as Voldemort's fingers trailed through his still-wet hair, blissfully light and warm. The connection between them was

thrumming so strongly it was all Harry could do to not sigh. *I know…*

But he had said he would let him. Perhaps, over time, he could show him… Harry could, maybe, somehow, make Voldemort see that this, having a whole soul, was something *he* should have… That he should feel remorse… Even if it's painful, even if it's horrible…

But why would he ever bother, when he can just use you?

That sinister thought was chased from his mind as Voldemort reached for Harry's hand with the one which was not carding through his damp hair. He interlaced his long fingers with Harry's, moving so gently and cautiously for someone so lethal. Harry blearily opened his eyes to watch as Voldemort lifted his arm up, lightly pressing his mouth to Harry's wrist and breathing in, slowly…

Harry was just wondering if Voldemort could feel his pulse against his lips when the light escalated further, so pleasant that Harry's eyes closed again… He sighed…

He thought he heard Voldemort speak, but he couldn't make out the words… Harry's chest moved slightly with the slow rhythm of the Dark Lord's breathing, a steady motion… It almost felt like being rocked back and forth…

The world of pleasant light and warmth behind his eyelids was flooding with color…

Red… and yellow, and brown…

Harry was surrounded by them, bits of warm, autumn hues. They were leaves, shimming in their transparency as the afternoon sun shone through them from above, merry and bright. A breeze blew past and the leaves fell, whirling around Harry like a miniature tornado of gold and crimson, ochre and scarlet. Interwoven with the whispers of the wind, Harry heard laughter like a child's, innocent and full of delight. It sounded like music.

Everything was lightness, sweetness, and warmth.

A Hallow

Harry still had autumn in his mind when he woke. He expected to see a clear blue sky when he opened his eyes, to be greeted by ochre leaves and a child's laughter carrying on the breeze.

When he was met instead with his own reflection—the mirror, that *damn* mirror above his bed—Harry was startled into reality. He glowered at the Harry Potter in the mirror, with his scarlet eyes and…

And under the covers, tucked in sweetly like a child that had been put to bed…

Harry couldn't remember that happening. The last thing Harry recalled was allowing the Dark Lord to tap into that connection as deeply as he wanted, to the point where he, Harry, could hardly register what was happening around him, and…

Had he passed out like that? Sitting up, leaning on Voldemort's chest? He must have, because he had no solid recollection of anything after that—only half-constructed memories that were probably his own dreams, not anything Voldemort was 'gifting' him with…

Harry sat up, and he was alarmed at just how heavy his body was. His head felt like it was made of stone, a weight on his shoulders that made him want nothing more than to lay back down, sinking into the silken sheets to go back to sleep. Perhaps he was just exhausted, and it was still very late…? Harry looked at the grandfather clock, and his heart was filled with trepidation.

Two. Two o' clock. And without even leaving his windowless room, Harry knew that it was not two in the morning, just a few hours past midnight.

Harry scrambled out of bed, angry and groggy and panicked, so panicked, though he was not fully sure as to why that was the case. His sluggish mind had yet to catch up to his emotions, which were viscerally distressed. He staggered towards the door, but after a few steps he felt lightheaded, and his breathing was labored. Harry paused and leaned against the chair in front of the vanity to catch his breath. When he looked at his reflection—really looking, this time—his panic escalated.

He looked even worse than he felt.

Now that he could examine himself more closely, he saw just how tired he looked. There were bags under his eyes like he had not slept for days; a disquieting fact, considering that he had, in fact, just slept for over twelve hours. And he had slept deeply at that. He hadn't had nightmares; he hadn't woken with his heart pounding or a scream on his lips, broken out in a cold sweat…

So why did he look so… horrible?

Because he was draining you, said that same voice which warned Harry constantly; the one which reminded him that Voldemort was using him time and time again. *When you let him tap into that bond between you, he takes as much as you'll allow… which is everything. Your magic, your energy, your* soul.

Voldemort will always take everything.

And Harry knew—knew in the way he felt tired to his very core, an exhaustion so deep that he could feel it in his bones—that this was true. And Harry had just let him do it, like some subservient, well-behaved pet.

Good boy.

"He's… He's a god damn succubus," Harry declared angrily.

He watched as his livid, red eyes widened in the mirror, despite how fixed his glower actually was. "It is taxing, being your vanity," his reflection responded with a sigh.

Harry swore, turned away, and stormed out of the room.

This was not right. *He* was not right.

Even as he marched down the hall, bolstering as much anger as he could in hopes that it would fuel him, ignoring the portraits of Malfoy ancestors who straightened their postures as he passed, Harry felt wrong. *Weak.*

Voldemort wasn't just touching upon the connection which bound them, benignly basking in that light that was some conglomeration of Harry's magic and his soul—a pure soul, a *whole* soul—he was *draining* him of it. Voldemort was a greedy, pervasive monster, and he was sucking in as much of that light as he could—never mind what it did to Harry, leaving him feeble and magically exhausted afterwards. In fact, that was probably a very fortuitous and happy side-effect in

Voldemort's eyes. The more avaricious he was, the weaker it left Harry, and that just made it that much easier to control his typically reckless, Gryffindor horcrux, didn't it?

No more, Harry thought. *No fucking more. To hell with trying to be acquiescent. He's not going to hurt Ron or Hermione, not anymore. He swore as much. Let him try and threaten me with their safety; let him go back on his word. We'll see how long that threat holds up when* I *threaten to hold out on* him *forever.*

Despite the fury broiling in his chest, Harry felt like he was moving through a fog. He wasn't sure where he was going exactly, as he stomped through the halls of Malfoy Manor unattended. He stopped to take notice of where he was. It was a corridor that was unfamiliar to him.

"Mr. Potter," a voice drawled. Harry looked up to see an old, blonde man in a nice set of dress robes addressing him from within a golden frame. "What *are* you doing, running amok in my manor by yourself?"

"Fuck you," Harry spat, unthinking. He ignored the scandalized sound the man made and turned around, starting to walk back the way he had come, hoping to find some landmark in this labyrinth-like manor that was familiar. Bloody hell, how big was this place?

He only made it about five paces before a sharp *crack* resounded in front of him. Binny the house-elf had appeared, and he looked concerned. "Mr. Potter!" he squeaked. "You is awake!"

"Where are Hermione and Ron?" Harry asked, skipping all pleasantries. "I want to see them. Take me to them."

The elf's ears flattened to his head as he stood. "I-I is sorry, Mr. Potter, I cannot be doing that," Binny murmured. "Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger is gone."

"Where are they? Why? When will they be back?"

"Th-the Ministry, sir," Binny answered. The elf's eyes fell to the floor, away from Harry's glare. "Master summoned them there, sir. They is t-to be gone all day, Binny was told."

Harry's jaw fell open. "All day," he repeated blankly. Binny nodded. "They're gone all day." Harry swallowed hard; his throat felt raw. "And let me take a wild guess—Draco has conveniently vanished too. And his father."

Binny nodded again. So, Harry had been left in Malfoy Manor. Alone. Again. To be babysat by a terrified house-elf. Unless one counted the company of Narcissa Malfoy, of course, who was probably busy torturing some poor wedding planners somewhere on the premises.

His freedom, his friends, his energy—his *sanity*. Voldemort was taking everything from him.

Harry thought of the simple but damning instructions he'd been given. To *behave* himself, and to be back in his room by midnight every night.

I will not wait.

Oh, I'll be there, Harry thought furiously. *I'll be there just as I'm supposed to be,* my Lord. *And I'll even behave myself… right up until the clock strikes midnight, and you show that new, pretty face of yours that you owe me and my magic for.*

Another sudden rush of light-headedness swooped through him, and Harry almost fell on the spot, his legs going weak. Binny raised one arm and a wave of magic caught him, holding him in place. For a second, Harry sensed it again—the slightest flickering of what had to be house-elf magic.

Harry forced himself to focus, to remain conscious as he righted himself. He leaned against the wall, breathing hard. "Is you all right, sir?" Binny asked.

Harry didn't answer. He merely stood there, willing the world to stop turning and his head to stop swimming. He closed his eyes and took in several deep, steadying breaths.

It didn't work. Harry could tell he was about to pass out; the sensation had become all too familiar to him as of late. "Fuck Voldemort," he snarled, wishing more than ever that the Taboo was still in effect for him, that Voldemort would know his precious name had just been slandered. Binny squealed, and the portrait behind him let out a sharp cry. It was the last thing Harry heard before the spinning world started to blur.

The portraits began to melt on the walls; frames turning into liquid gold as they oozed along the wallpaper towards the floor. The blonde man let out a blood-curdling cry, and his eyes became gaping holes before he too was melting; paint in every color mottling as it swirled like water flushing down a drain, flowing onto the ground…

Harry looked around as he realized the true horror of his situation—it was not only the paintings which had begin to bleed and fall apart, but the entire manor. The walls were deteriorating on all sides; the wall sconces were becoming liquid glass, oozing from their settings and dripping in thick blobs onto the carpet—and that too was turning to mush beneath Harry's feet… Harry cried out for help, but there was no one there to hear him; Binny was gone, the man in the frame was gone, everyone was *gone*…

When Harry tried to run, he began to sink. The carpet had become something thick and gelatinous; Harry was being sucked into it like quicksand when he moved, and the more he struggled to free himself, the more it pulled him in. The walls collapsed on top of him; he was going to drown in this manor, to be buried alive beneath its wallpaper and gilded frames and brilliant, crystal lights…

Harry shot up, heart pounding.

…His room.

He was back in his room. Harry wanted to scream when he looked back up at his reflection, the damn mirror over his bed that he had just left behind. He hurried out of bed, and this time, at least, he did not feel sluggish nor heavy. He checked the clock.

"No," Harry said in absolute denial. "No, it can't be…"

But it was.

Eleven.

Voldemort was going to be here in one hour. *He had lost an entire day.* And this was after only *one* evening of Voldemort being a greedy, covetous monster showing up in his room, *one* night of Harry just letting him take what he wanted. Harry swore loudly and started to pace, feeling like a lion trapped in a cage. Was this the fate that he was damned to live forever? Doomed to exist in an endless, horrific loop?

Wake up, feel awful, pass out. Voldemort. Sleep. Rinse and repeat.

A *pop* echoed in his room, and Binny was there. Because, of course, he had to be babysat by the elf. How could he have forgotten so quickly? "Mr. Potter," Binny said nervously, bowing low. "Is y-you—"

"Get out," Harry seethed. His voice was far more venomous than he

ever knew it could be.

Binny's eyes widened fearfully. "But… But I is—"

"Now."

It didn't seem to matter that Harry was not his master. Binny didn't hesitate after that cold, direct order, and he vanished on the spot.

Harry knew that was unfair of him—it was not the house-elf who had done this to him; in fact, the poor thing was doing everything he could to make Harry comfortable—but Harry didn't much care right then. He hated everyone and everything associated with this manor.

But most of all, he hated Voldemort.

Harry's ire was so strong that even his curiosity of what Hermione and Ron had been doing all day was chased away. He would see them tomorrow. He would demand it.

Right now, tonight, his focus was all for Voldemort.

Harry decided to shower again, but not even the sensation of warm water and scented soap could calm him. He was just an incensed when he stepped out of the tub, and as he wiped the condensation from the mirror to catch his own, red eyes glaring back at him, his anger spiked even further.

Fuck Voldemort.

Harry dressed, turned the chair in front of the vanity so that it was facing away from the mirror, and sat.

He waited.

Harry crossed his arms over his chest and glowered, watching the clock and counting down the seconds until Voldemort would show up. Could he feel his emotions right now? Furious and impatient, waiting for midnight to arrive? Harry didn't know, nor was he sure if this would be a good thing or not. Did he *want* Voldemort to show up aware, prepared for an angry Harry Potter? Or did he want him to be caught off guard when Harry immediately denied him the connection he so craved?

Just as the clock struck midnight, Voldemort's aura saturated the air. In the Dark Lord's typical fashion, he had appeared behind Harry—

being *elusive* and *mysterious* and it was just too bad for him that Harry knew he was there, and he was not nearly as enigmatic as he thought.

Harry waited, his heart pounding and his arms folded, staring at the wall. Voldemort would try and call forth that light any second, and Harry would not allow it; he would turn in his seat and smile maliciously and—

"A gift."

Those words were enough to startle the rage from Harry. That statement was always preceded by something horrific or beautiful or, more often than not, some combination of the two. Harry turned around in his chair, and his jaw nearly hit the floor when he did.

There was Lord Voldemort, in all his black, gold, lustrous glory, and in his hands…

"My cloak," Harry breathed, jumping to his feet. He took one hasty step forward, reaching for it, but then paused. The last time Voldemort had allowed Harry his cloak, it was only a temporary arrangement because they were going to Azkaban, where Harry was to remain unseen. Harry looked at Voldemort apprehensively. There was no mistaking the gesture—Voldemort was holding the cloak out to Harry, his arms extended. An offering. "Why?" Harry asked.

"Because I am a merciful Lord… and I always reward good behavior." A pause. Voldemort's face was neutral, but his magic flickered luminously. "Do you not want it back?" he said when Harry did not move nor speak.

Harry was filled with conflict. Yes, he did want it back. He wanted It back very, very badly. His fingers were twitching with the urge to reach out and snatch it.

Think, said that rational voice in the back of his mind. *He just said that he rewards good behavior… This is a manipulation, practically a bribe; a way to get you to keep doing what he wants without fighting him…*

Did that mean that he had felt Harry's emotions earlier, then? Had Voldemort sensed Harry's fury when he'd said his name before passing out in the hallway?

Do you know how your heart haunts me…?

Or was this just a coincidence? Had he planned on returning Harry's

cloak to him tonight anyway, as a preemptive incentive for Harry to continue to be submissive?

Harry's mind was racing with the possibilities, and as he stood there, suspicious and torn, Voldemort's magic began to dance with impatience. "If you do not want it, then I shall continue to—"

Harry made up his mind. He didn't bother saying anything, only rushed forward and grabbed the cloak. The fabric slipped from Voldemort's yielding hands, and as Harry held it tightly to his chest, his magic glimmered triumphantly.

Harry turned away from him. He didn't care what Voldemort thought he might be accomplishing by giving him his cloak back, but he couldn't pass up this offer. This was his Cloak of Invisibility; an heirloom passed down from his father, and his father's father…

And a hallow.

"You're pleased," Voldemort said, surely watching the way that Harry was cradling the cloak like the precious item that it was. Harry turned to face him, glaring. If Voldemort was expecting a thank you, he was not going to get one.

"Why are you giving this back to me?" he asked instead. "So you can threaten to take it away later, maybe?"

Harry scoffed. He hadn't considered that as a reason until he'd said it out loud, but as he did, he realized that might be true.

Bizarrely, Voldemort looked offended. "You think I grant rewards merely to be used as future threats? Boons I can later retract if and when I feel the need?"

"Sounds like something you would do."

"You continue to be woefully ignorant."

"Okay."

Harry was in no mood for Voldemort's mind games. He said nothing more, waiting instead for the moment when Voldemort would try and call that light forth. For the moment he could say *no.*

Voldemort still refused to do so. He took a few steps towards Harry, almost lazy in his movements, ignoring how angry Harry clearly was.

“I will not take it away from you,” he said, his eyes flickering to the cloak. “In fact, I would like you to keep it on you at all times.”

Harry raised one brow at that, but still he held his tongue.

“You think I am concerned that you will try and use it against me,” Voldemort said, giving voice to Harry’s unasked question. He smiled. “As if you could *ever* hide from me."

Harry remembered viscerally how the Dark Lord had somehow been able to see him through the cloak that fateful day; how he had made eye contact with him before they entered Azkaban. Harry had a dark theory that it had to do with his eyes, his new, horrific red eyes…

But still he did not ask. Though his blood was boiling ever hotter, Harry did not say anything. Only waited.

“Nor do I expect that you will use it to hide from anyone within the manor,” Voldemort went on conversationally. He was moving closer, but nothing happened—yet. “Because you are so well-behaved lately. So responsible.” Voldemort’s eyes were gleaming, his smile cruel and condescending. “Because you’re such a *good boy*.”

It took all of Harry’s willpower to not snap at that statement. Voldemort’s eyes brightened, like he was waiting for Harry to lose control, expecting it, possibly even wanting it.

Harry wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. “I want a wand,” he said in as even a voice as he could manage.

Voldemort’s eyes widened marginally in surprise. “…A wand,” he repeated.

“Yes,” Harry said. “I want a wand. I’m a free man, aren’t I? And I’m supposed to go out with Narcissa tomorrow, anyway. I want to get a wand. It’s not really asking much, considering that my wand was broken because of *you*… Vanished because of *you.*”

Voldemort looked neither offended nor bothered by Harry’s bitter—and *accurate*—accusations. He tilted his head to one side, staring at Harry like he was honestly, shockingly, considering this request.

After an excruciatingly long moment, he spoke. “I shall make you a deal, Harry,” he said, taking another step nearer to him. “I will grant you the use of a wand… but you must do something for me first.”

“Gee, I wonder what that might be,” Harry said, but his voice sounded weaker than he wanted it to. As usual, Voldemort was getting far too close.

“Prove to me that you are worthy of such a reward,” he went on, ignoring Harry’s sarcasm. “Continue to be obedient for the next week, and I shall allow you to carry a wand.”

“I want to get one tomorrow."

“No.”

“Yes,” Harry hissed, “or I won’t…”

Harry faltered in his threat. Voldemort’s magic had blackened to a dark and sickening state; his benign expression had turned cold. “Or you won’t *what?*” Voldemort asked in a soft voice.

Harry inhaled a sharp breath. No, he would not allow himself to be *frightened* into submission, either. He would not. “Or I won’t… I won’t…”

But how *hard* it was, to put it into words! Neither of them had done so yet. The warmth and light and pleasant feeling that ignited between them was something that had remained unspoken. It was just this… this bizarre but beautiful *thing*, this connection that they were both fascinated by and, Harry was sure, ashamed of. Because it was so intimate, so pleasant, so unwanted that it was absurdly awkward to admit out loud.

But the Dark Lord was the one who was an addict, who had everything to lose—and so Harry swallowed back his embarrassment and said, “Or I will cut you off from the wholeness of my soul forever.”

The threat did not settle well with Voldemort.

Harry knew it wouldn’t, but he was nowhere near prepared for the ferocity that stirred in his magic. It was black and horrifying and Harry could feel it wrapping around him like a heavy, oppressive sheet; he was immobilized by it—*literally*, he realized with dread; Voldemort’s magic had seeped around him and was clinging to his arms and legs, and he could not move his limbs when he tried, he was frozen from the neck down—

Some small part of him registered that this must be what all wandless

magic was like—magical auras reaching out and causing objects to move or shatter or whatever else—but Harry could hardly focus on that now. In great contrast to his magic, Voldemort's face was still flat, betraying little emotion. But his eyes smoldered. "Are you insinuating that I *need* you, Harry?" he whispered. "Do you think that I am reliant on you and your *precious soul*—which, need I remind you, is *mine?*"

Harry was so baffled that this was even a question that his terror vanished. "That's exactly what I'm insinuating," he said bluntly. "You're an addict."

Voldemort grabbed his face, his nails digging into his jaw. Harry winced. "And what good would come from denying me?" he asked, his voice becoming softer still.

"I wouldn't be reduced to something that can barely walk, for one," Harry said. "I was hardly able to do anything today. I passed out as soon as I tried to walk somewhere, I didn't eat, I—"

Voldemort released Harry's jaw. His wandless spell stopped keeping his body immobilized, and both his face and magic lit up in concern. "You did not eat?" he asked.

The sudden switch from fury to worry was enough to make Harry's head spin. "Er, no, I didn't," he said. "I didn't do much at all except—"

But Voldemort had already turned away, and his magic was swelling with anger again… only, for once, this anger did not seem to be directed at Harry.

Harry figured out why that was the case about two seconds later. "It wasn't Draco's fault! I didn't even see him, and—and it wasn't Binny's fault, either! He brought me back here when I passed out, but I demanded that he leave me alone when I woke up—"

"Binny?" Voldemort snapped, looking confused and angrier still.

"Th-the house-elf," Harry said. Understanding washed over the Dark Lord's face, but he continued to look furious. "But you can't be angry at them—this is *your* doing. You're the one who did this to me. Your—your greediness is draining me. *Hurting* me."

Harry wished he had come up with this argument earlier. Voldemort kept his body composed, but his magic showed how worried this revelation made him. He had clearly not considered that Harry being weak meant Harry being unable to perform the basic functions of

every day life… as well as a very *unhappy* Harry, which they both knew could result in tragic consequences.

Voldemort's mind was reeling, Harry could tell. "So… you should probably practice a bit more… restraint, then," he said inelegantly. Harry's cheeks burned when the words left his mouth. He cursed himself for blushing, but kept his chin raised and his face set.

Voldemort stared at him with that same, calculating look. His magic whirled back and forth, back forth…

"Restraint," he echoed, so quiet Harry barely heard it.

Harry nodded. His face, annoyingly, burned hotter. He doubted Voldemort had ever once practiced restraint in his life—he took what he wanted and that was it. There was no in-between for Lord Voldemort.

But he was going to need to learn if he didn't want his last horcrux to waste away.

"…I will do this," Voldemort said. His gaze was focused not on Harry when he spoke, but towards the wall. His magic was writhing chaotically; Harry imagined this was highly uncomfortable for him. Probably even more so than it was for Harry. "But you will not deny me. And in exchange, should you be well-behaved and healthy, I shall allow you the use of a wand in a week's time."

"Tomorrow," Harry countered.

"No."

Voldemort's rage exploded again, and this time, Harry was once more its sole target. He was shocked at how forcefully it struck him. Harry felt like something hard hit him from behind—Voldemort's magic, a flash of black and gold—forcing his legs to bend, and Harry landed on his knees with a crushing pain, dropping his cloak when he fell. Before he could do more than flinch, Voldemort was standing over him, grabbing him by the hair and yanking his head back. Harry's heart leapt into his throat at the fury in his face.

"You overstep yourself, Harry," Voldemort fumed. He tightened his hold on his hair, making Harry's eyes water. "You think that because I have been merciful that you suddenly have power. You do not. You are still *mine*; you are nothing but my property. *No*."

He snarled the last word when Harry had opened his mouth to argue, and pain shot across his scar—quick and sharp, like the cracking of a whip. “Do not defy me. Do not dare to raise your voice against me on this matter. You have been and always will belong to *me*, and for this, you should be *grateful*. You have been guaranteed the safety of your friends and anyone you may care for, and for this you should be *grateful*. You have had your cloak returned to you, I have just informed you that you shall soon have a wand, that I shall exercise some *restraint* on your behalf—” another lick of pain burned across Harry’s forehead, perhaps unintentionally—"and still you have the audacity to demand *more*… and you say it is *I* who is greedy.”

He let out a short and bitter laugh. Harry wanted to point out that he was only asking for that which had belonged to him *before* Voldemort came into his life, not something *more*, but he couldn’t speak. Voldemort was pulling too hard on his hair, the pain so sharp it was all he could do to repress a whimper.

Voldemort watched the way Harry’s eyes watered for a moment before continuing. “This is where you belong,” he said, his furious magic quieting a bit. “Before me, prostrating yourself on your knees, thanking me for my endless *mercy*.”

He finally released his hair. Harry fell forward—he had not realized how much of his weight Voldemort was supporting—and, mortifyingly enough, found himself on his arms and knees before the Dark Lord, and when had his body started shaking? Why must he always be so quick to tremble?

Voldemort snapped his fingers. Harry looked up at the sound, which was followed quickly by a *pop*. Binny the house-elf was there, and upon arriving in the presence of Lord Voldemort, he fell into such a subservient bow that his ears touched the floor. He shook even as badly as Harry.

“Bring food,” Voldemort demanded coldly. “Harry needs to eat.”

“Y-yes, master,” Binny squeaked, then disappeared.

With a twitch of his wrist, Harry’s bent back was lifted again, Voldemort’s magic holding him and forcing his jaw to raise so that he was looking up. “I will return to you tomorrow evening,” Voldemort said, his voice now as smooth as velvet—no longer sharp nor furious. “Consider all which I have said carefully before you think to threaten me again—to delude yourself for a moment that you hold any power.

For all of one week, show me that you are capable of total subservience, and in exchange…" he paused, like he was bracing himself before he continued, saying, "in exchange, I shall show restraint… as well as consider your request for a wand."

Harry didn't like how the wording had gone from 'grant' to 'consider', but he didn't feel like pointing this out would do him any favors.

Voldemort didn't wait for him to muster up a response, anyway. "Rest well," he said, then disappeared in a flash of black and glinting gold. Harry collapsed once he was gone, the Dark Lord's magic no longer present to keep him upright.

Dirty Little Secret

Harry waited for morning with great excitement.

Of course he was furious with how his interaction with Voldemort had gone, and sure, he was tempted to leave his room and storm through the halls, to wake Ron and Hermione and find out what they had been doing the past day—but he knew that would be stupid, and he quickly became preoccupied by the fact that he would be leaving the manor soon. Tomorrow was Monday. Narcissa would be taking him to Diagon Alley so that he could get new robes and whatever else he might need.

So, Harry waited (after eating enough food to feed a family of four—he hadn't realized just how ravenous he was until Binny reappeared with a spread), laying on his side on his bed, hardly sleeping at all.

Narcissa came for him a little after nine, and by the time she knocked on his door, Harry was already up and dressed, his Invisibility Cloak stowed safely in his pocket. She smiled when she caught him trying to flatten his hair on their way to the foyer.

"I thought it never lied flat?" she said, smirking.

"Doesn't mean I can't fight the good fight," said Harry, raking his fingers across his scalp again. He could tell by the way Narcissa's magic flickered and her lips twitched that his efforts had done no good at all.

They did not run into anyone else as they made their way through the manor, and it was only when Harry asked if Ron and Hermione would be able to come that he was reminded of what else Monday morning meant. Ron's penance to the Ministry had begun, so he was already there, working his first day under Umbridge with Fred and George. Hermione, Narcissa said, had been summoned, as had her son and Lucius… though where they were and what they were doing, she did not know. Harry could not decide whom he pitied the most.

Moments later, however, and even those distressing thought were driven from Harry's mind. He and Narcissa were soon tossing floo powder into the fireplace, and shouting the words "Diagon Alley!" into the flames.

Magic.

It was in the people and it was in the air; Harry could sense mild fluctuations of it coming from shops and streets corners and a particularly strong aura coming from a manhole of all things, which Harry guessed must be concealing something.

Freedom, freedom! Harry's psyche screamed as he basked in the sensation of magic and the warm, summer breeze dancing across his face. *Well, not really freedom, just the* illusion *of freedom,* the much smarter voice of his subconscious chimed in. *But a riveting experience all the same.*

Harry was disappointed when Narcissa said they had no need to go to Gringotts. Anything Harry wanted was being paid for… though she did not elaborate from where, precisely, the gold was coming.

Everywhere they went people stared. Which wasn't a behavior that Harry was unaccustomed to, but it still unnerved him. These were not curious, excited whispers which he barely made out from behind raised hands; the eyes of passers-by were not wide with wonder to see the Boy Who Lived. No, *these* gazes, which were stricken upon meeting the face of the recently released Harry Potter, were anxious. Their magic spiked brightly when they would make eye contact with him, and then their focus would fall to the ground and they would shuffle away as quickly as possible. Harry and Narcissa were given a wide berth.

They're afraid of me, Harry realized, baffled as one man squealed when he saw him, then turned right around and ran in the opposite direction. *They're terrified.*

Well of course they are, said that perceptive voice. *When they look at you, they see the eyes of the Dark Lord staring back at them.*

Harry hung his head and tried not to make eye contact with anyone else, wishing that he could take out his cloak and hide from the world.

When they entered Madame Malkin's, the poor witch about had a heart attack upon seen Harry Potter and Narcissa Malfoy in her shop. Harry could hardly blame her reaction—the last time the two of them were here, they'd argued and hurled dangerous, offensive words at one other. Frightening words.

"Maybe we should go to the other shop," Harry mumbled when the owner dropped everything she was doing, nearly knocking one of her other customers from their stool.

Narcissa opened her mouth to reply, but before she could say anything, Madam Malkin came rushing over. “Oh, Mrs. Malfoy! And Mr. P-Potter!” she exclaimed. Her magic was a deep amber, like honey. It danced around her in a panic as she spoke. “What an honor! I’ll assist you right away, yes. Whatever can I do for you?”

She looked petrified.

Still, she was doing her best to act courteous, so they did not leave. Harry was taken to a changing room where a measuring tape began whirling around him, taking his measurements, and through the door he could make out Narcissa’s voice as she listed off the kinds of robes he would need. Maybe he would have found that annoying any other day—did he not even get a choice in what he would be wearing?—but just then, he found it a relief. He didn’t really care about his clothing, and he trusted Narcissa Malfoy’s fashion choices enough. He knew that he would not be forced to wear anything with frills, at least. Harry almost chuckled as he recalled Ron before the Yule Ball, lamenting his dress robes in the mirror, the cuffs fringed from where he’d tried to burn off the lace.

Harry was fitted for more robes than he could ever hope to wear, mostly in black. Some were long and flowing and gave him an air of mystery that was absolutely false; some were tighter and form-fitting and made him realize that he really had become too thin; and some were fancier garments that Harry was certain he would be wearing to special events, like Ron and Hermione’s wedding. The dress robes he tried on were made of deep, velvety green, and Harry was again reminded of how that color would have once matched his eyes. Now they made his scarlet irises look even redder, and when he clasped the silver buckle around his throat, he couldn’t help but think he looked far too much like someone else.

But not my hair, he thought as he watched Narcissa in the mirror, fussing over the quality of the fabric and snapping at poor Madam Malkin. *That screams* defiant.

When they were finally done, told that his robes would be finished and delivered sometime tomorrow (which Harry thought an insane turnaround, considering just how many garments he’d ordered), they went to a few other shops. Harry got a new watch to replace the one he’d lost when he’d been kidnapped, presumably taken from his wrist to be replaced by iron shackles. And while nothing could be a substitute for nostalgia of a gift given to him by Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, the finest watch money could buy (which he did not ask for, but

which Narcissa insisted upon) sort of came close.

After they stopped for lunch at a little restaurant (where they were given the best table and waited on by a waitress whose magic was so nervous Harry was surprised she did not drop everything when she hovered her tray), Narcissa took him to an ice cream parlour—which was mostly incredible as it had been her suggestion, not his.

“My sweet tooth knows no bounds,” she said as she pulled him along, her navy magic cheerful and light. “Have you ever tried the chocolate and raspberry?”

“I tried every flavor and then some one summer,” Harry said, sighing reminiscently as he recalled the day he blew his aunt up like a balloon and sent her sailing away, then walked out on the Dursleys. “I stayed in Diagon Alley for a few weeks, and when I would do my homework there, Mr. Fortescue would give me free ice cream every half hour.”

Harry's throat suddenly constricted. For he only just then remembered, Mr. Fortescue was no longer running this shop. He had gone mysteriously missing one day, early on the war...

Narcissa didn't catch his sudden discomfort, though, and she stared at him like he’d just said the most magical of enchantments. “Free ice cream? Every half hour?” she repeated. Harry nodded. “You must teach me your manipulative ways.”

The new shop owner, a young, rail-thin man, *did* give them free ice cream when they entered the shop, but it had nothing to do with Harry being a pitiable, scrawny kid working on his homework, nor any cunning manipulations. The shop owner, just like everyone else they’d encountered, looked upon Harry and Narcissa with fear-filled eyes, and when he said it was on the house, bowed them out of his shop like he was relieved that they were leaving.

Narcissa didn’t seem bothered by the man's behavior, nor anyone else’s. Harry wasn’t sure if her cool demeanor was one she was putting on for his benefit, in hopes that she would not make Harry feel even more uncomfortable, or if people typically acted afraid of Narcissa Malfoy when she was out, and this entire day was not that unordinary for her. Her magic gave away nothing. She licked the raspberry flavored ice cream from her spoon with no concern, then gave Harry a sharp look when he failed to touch his.

“A free treat is a free treat,” she said, pointing her spoon at him. “Never mind the details, Harry. Doing so could drive you mad.”

As much as Harry wished they could keep away from Malfoy Manor all afternoon—his eyes kept straying towards where he knew Ollivander's to be, and he wondered how hard it would be to persuade Narcissa into taking him there, Voldemort's will be damned—it could not be so. When it neared three, Narcissa informed Harry that they had to return. She was meeting with wedding planners, she said, and there was much work to be done.

Harry was relieved to find that he was not expected to be a part of this work. The moment they arrived back at Malfoy manor, Narcissa summoned Binny, instructing the elf to tend to Harry and do whatever he might ask for to make his afternoon comfortable.

"Within reason," she'd added, with warning look towards Harry. She then returned her attention to Binny. "Have my husband and son returned yet? Has Hermione?"

"No, Mistress," said Binny. "Not yet. Binny has not been seeing them."

"What about Ron?" Harry asked.

"Oh, dear, I doubt he'll be back before five, if then," Narcissa said. "I know Dolores well enough to know that she will keep them as long as she is allowed, without a doubt."

But Harry almost laughed at her words, because even though Narcissa's expression remained neutral, her magic had become a bit sharper on at the word 'Dolores', and Harry could tell—Narcissa Malfoy did not like Umbridge, either.

Harry nodded and took his leave then, saying he fancied a shower after running around Diagon Alley all day, and was very glad that he had. He was halfway up the stairs when he heard a slew of people arriving in the foyer, and a quick glance over his shoulder told him it was, indeed, the wedding planners. Harry ran from their voices and spirited magic like they were a swarm of doxies. Already he could sense Narcissa's aura darkening—*irritated*—and they had not even gotten through their 'hello's'.

Deciding that he had nothing better to do until at least five (and who knew what the Dark Lord had Hermione doing?), Harry decided to while away the next hour or so by doing something unthinkable—relaxing.

Once he made it to his room and closed the door, Harry stripped off

his clothes, thankful that soon he would no longer need to borrow Draco's robes. He went into the bathroom and filled the tub with warm, inviting water. It was like a miniature version of the prefect's bathroom. Multiple taps emitted different colored suds, and within a minute the huge basin was full of steaming, sandal-wood scented water. Harry slipped beneath the surface and sighed.

Life isn't so terrible, he thought to himself, leaning back and letting the water ease his aching body.

…Well, all right, it's pretty terrible. But there's no point dwelling on that continuously.

For a long, blissful time, Harry succeeded in thinking about *nothing*. He closed his eyes and focused on his breathing; on the slow, steady rhythm of his heart. He wondered if this was how one was supposed to feel, before practicing Occlumency.

Empty your mind… Think of nothing…

Breathe in…

Empty your mind…

Breathe out…

Harry managed to continue this meditation until he felt oddly at peace with himself. When he opened his eyes again, he felt a serenity that he had experienced few times in his life. In fact, as he thought on that, he realized that there had only been *one* time he'd felt so bizarrely calm, despite life being chaotic and awful.

After Dobby died.

It was after their escape from Malfoy Manor, when Dobby the house-elf had rescued them from mortal peril. When Harry had held his lifeless, limp form in his arms, when he had dug his grave himself, committed to burying his friend—he had been somber, devasted… but calm. Voldemort's storm of emotions hadn't been able to touch him. Harry had been in control of his mind, his body, and his heart, and he had been able to think clearly.

Harry raised his palms through the water, cupping a large bubble and lifting it to his face. He saw his own reflection on the surface: pale, distorted features and bright, red eyes.

How should he proceed with Voldemort?

Harry let out a long breath, sending the bubble floating up and away from the tub. Their last interaction had gone… badly. Just as he thought he'd been making progress, that he finally had some power, Voldemort reminded him forcefully that he did not.

…But didn't he?

Harry slipped further into the water and pondered this. Yes, of course he did. Voldemort craved the feeling of his soul, the reprieve of not feeling broken… and he couldn't have that if Harry wasn't willing. But how was Harry supposed to use this as leverage? Threatening had done no good at all; it had only made Voldemort much, much uglier to deal with.

Well, obviously that was going to happen, Harry thought, once more annoyed at himself for his own actions. Why had he *threatened* the Dark Lord? Voldemort was a megalomaniac; power was all that mattered to him. So why had Harry even considered trying to intimidate him? That was never going to work.

Because I'd just realized how much of my energy he was draining, turning me into a pathetic, weak thing, Harry reminded himself. *I was angry. Very angry. I had every right to be, and that bastard knew it, and...*

And that had *to be why he brought the cloak,* he concluded. *There's no way that it was a coincidence that he gave it to me then, that he hadn't pick up on my anger. There are no coincidences with Voldemort.*

Harry held his breath and dunked his head under the water, rubbing at his scalp with the suds. He came back up for air a moment later, wiping the water from his face. That wasn't a bribe, then, Voldemort giving him his cloak… It was more of a… peace offering. Probably the closest thing to a remorseful action that the Dark Lord had ever made —even if he *had* covered the gesture in sly, condescending words. The fact of the matter was that Voldemort had been overly greedy (and was fully aware of it), he had felt Harry's anger, and the whole ordeal made him feel strongly enough to do something about it to try and make things… better.

Which was technically a good thing, Harry now realized, and rather than encourage that sort of behavior from a psychotic Dark Lord, he had gone and made it worse. Harry had taken the cloak without a word, then demanded a wand as well.

…*Was* he being stupid?

Harry didn't think his actions were unjustified, not in the least—but he took a deep breath and, begrudgingly, tried to see this from the Dark Lord's point of view.

He thinks he is in the right on all matters. He believes that he is doing the wizarding world a favor by being in control. He really does not think that he is evil nor wrong.

Harry felt it important to solidify these facts in his mind first. Only then did he move forward with his speculation.

Voldemort had been on a clear path to victory during the first war… until the Prophecy. Until me. Then he killed my parents—deaths he *thinks were justified—failed to kill me, and wound up bodiless for over a decade. He finally gets one back, fails to kill me several more times, and then, when he finally has me, learns that I am one of his horcruxes… who he then finds out has been destroying all the others. Leaving him to either keep me alive or accept mortality…*

And maybe he really would have kept me in that cell forever had he never touched upon that brilliant, alluring light.

Harry ran his fingers through his hair, wringing some of the water from it. Unfortunately, the Dark Lord *had* touched upon that connection, and now that he knew it existed he could not pretend that he did not. Voldemort could not go back to that existence of cold, eternal brokenness. Harry suspected that the Dark Lord was secretly cursing himself for this every day; for this addiction that he had unwittingly thrown himself into and was now unable to resist.

So now, here they were, caught in the strangest and most complicated push and pull between hatred and desire, and Harry's head was spinning on how to prevent things from spiraling out of control. Because one thing was for certain—he could not handle this mercurial dynamic forever. The whiplash of Voldemort's emotions would push him beyond his limits, and that could not possibly mean anything good for anyone.

As much as Harry hated to accept it, he needed—for the time being—to be… *good*. In the Dark Lord's eyes, at least. Just keep his mouth shut and let Voldemort bask in the relief his soul provided. But not *too* much. Some middle ground where Voldemort could… get his fix, so to speak, but which wouldn't leave Harry a mess afterwards.

He wondered how well that would work out.

Harry shook his head, trying not to think about how tonight would go. Voldemort hadn't touched upon their connection at all last night—trying to prove some stupid point, like he didn't crave it as much as Harry knew he did—and that could make this evening difficult.

…Or *would* it matter? Would one day without any reprieve be so terrible for Voldemort? And if it *was* terrible for him… What was a Dark Lord in withdrawal like?

Horrible. Probably.

Well, I suppose I shall find out at midnight, Harry thought, feeling oddly unafraid about it. He took a deep breath and made a resolute vow. It didn't matter what Voldemort was like. It didn't matter how he acted, what he said, what he did. Harry was not going to say anything, just make sure that Voldemort held up his end of the bargain and showed some *restraint*. And then he, Harry, in one week's time… would have a *wand*.

Harry got out of the tub and dried off, then changed into fresh clothes. He had just shoved his cloak back in his pocket and was putting on his new watch—it was a quarter past five; he'd had no idea he'd lazed around in the tub that long—when he heard it.

A scream.

High, loud, and even though Harry knew it was from far away in the manor, he felt like it had struck him in the heart. He ran from his room, sprinting as fast as his legs would allow. He imagined terrible things as he rushed past moving portraits and crystal sconces, their lights a blur as he went—he pictured Hermione on the ground, writhing under a Cruciatus Curse, Ron being bound and gagged and forced to watch—

The screaming started again, and this time, it was not as loud, nor was it so guttural. In fact, as Harry followed the voice along the familiar path back to the foyer, he realized that they were words. Someone was shouting *at* someone else, and they were very, very angry.

Harry moved faster.

By the time he turned the corner, looking down the grand staircase into the foyer, the shouting had stopped. Harry was dumbfounded at what he saw.

The first one he looked at—for it would be impossible to notice anyone else first—was Narcissa, who had her back to him and was facing what Harry might have thought were frightened, lowly servants, but then quickly realized were the wedding planners. Her magic was tall and dark, and they all cowered before her, their own auras shriveled with fear. A few of them were holding flower arrangements, shielding their faces with them.

The second thing Harry noticed was that Ron and Hermione were both there, looking as frightened as the planners. By the looks of it, Ron had just gotten back—he was standing in front of the fireplace like he might have just stepped out of it, and he was surveying the scene before him with great trepidation, as though he was seriously considering going back to the Ministry with Umbridge.

Hermione and Draco, however, were closer to Narcissa. Hermione was edging away from her, but Draco was standing by her side, holding a pile of flowers that might have been pretty at some point, but were now utterly destroyed. Only Ron noticed Harry right away, as the others either had their back to him or were too focused on Narcissa to see anything else. From atop the stairs, Ron gave Harry a sharp look, like he was trying to say*, Save yourself!*

It was a tempting option. Harry probably could have slowly stepped away and disappeared down the hall again, and no one but Ron would have been any wiser.

But Harry had never been very good at abandoning his friends. He started to make his way down the stairs as Narcissa yelled, "*Well?* Is anyone going to answer me?"

Her magic stirred viciously, and she snatched one of the bouquets from the nearest wedding planner. The witch backed away afterwards like Narcissa had just stolen her wand, leaving her defenseless, and was now about to hex her. "Tell me!" Narcissa screeched. "What *is* it? What is the dominating color of this arrangement?"

She shook the bouquet violently in front of her. The woman stared at it, wide-eyed, and then finally, said, "P-pink, Madam Malfoy."

Narcissa was not happy with this answer. "And what is pink?" she hissed, her voice lower but no less intimidating. "Tell me, you with your enviable degree from the best aesthetic enchantment specialty school in Britain. What. Is. *Pink?*"

The witch's lips parted, but she didn't say anything. She looked at a

loss.

A peal of laughter drew everyone's attention to the other side of the room. Harry hadn't even noticed Bellatrix there, lounging in one of the chairs and watching this interaction with great interest. Her magic was deep and undulating, and her eyes gleamed with mischief. "Pink," she said, leaning forward as she answered for the witch as though she were telling them a great secret, "is a tint… of red."

"And I said. No. *RED!"*

Narcissa thrust the bouquet onto the ground, where the wedding planners scattered away from it like she'd just unleashed a poisonous snake on them all. Bellatrix cackled in delight, and Draco picked up the broken bouquet, adding it to his pile of floral casualties.

"Mother," Draco began, "Perhaps—"

Narcissa did not hear him. "Such simple instructions!" she shouted. "How is it I am met with such incompetence! The best London has to offer, indeed! Oh, where *is* Lucius?"

"I told you mother," Draco said, his magic whirling in alarm, "he said he was going to select linens for—"

"Linens! I already chose those, and I picked them up yesterday!"

"But—but some of them were coming undone at the seams, and so he went to return them! Completely unacceptable quality for what they'd cost, practically threadbare; father was *very* angry…"

Narcissa scrutinized him for a moment. Draco gave her a convincing look—Harry was impressed at his acting skills—and then she seemed to accept this response. "Threadbare linens, conflicting opinions on the best musicians, *pink* floral arrangements—must I do everything myself? Am I damned to be surrounded by ineptitude at every turn for the rest of my life? Oh, Harry, I didn't see you there. Did you have a good rest?"

Harry gawked at her. Narcissa had begun to pace in her ranting, and had therefore spotted him, now at the bottom on the stairs. Upon making eye contact with him, she had switched from petulant to sweet, her magic going from black to pleasantly blue so quickly that Harry thought she might be more mercurial than Voldemort. "Y-yes," he stuttered. He glanced at Hermione, whose face broke out into a relieved grin.

Narcissa caught their exchange, and smiling, said, “I think I can handle this on my own for the evening. Draco, why don’t you accompany our guests outside to the rose garden? It’s a lovely afternoon—far too nice to squander inside, suffering through the ineptitude of *this* group.”

Draco did not hesitate to seize an opportunity to escape. “Of course, mother,” he said. He dropped the flowers on the ground in a heap and shouted, “Binny!”, causing the house-elf to appear with a *pop*. “Throw out this inadequate *trash*.”

Narcissa nodded and gave her son an approving look for his criticism, and Harry thought he was beginning to understand just how the Malfoy family dynamic worked. “Come along, *guests*,” Draco said brightly, motioning for them to follow him. Harry, Ron, and Hermione shared a look, then were quick to do so. Harry was bursting at the seams to ask Hermione and Ron dozens of questions, but he didn’t want to start talking until they were out of earshot of all the wedding planners and—Harry’s stomach churned—Bellatrix Lestrange.

Fortunately, he did not have to wait long. They had only just left the hall when they come upon a glass door which led outside. Narcissa was right—it *was* a lovely day. The sky was blue and cloudless, the sun was shining and warm. There was even the sound of birdsong to greet them, light and blessedly cheery.

The moment the door closed behind them, Draco fixed Harry with a look. “Thank *fucking* Merlin you came downstairs when you did, Potter,” he said. “We might have been strung along all evening, otherwise…”

Harry ignored him, his attention all for Hermione and Ron. But before he could say anything, Hermione was throwing herself at him, trapping him in a hug. “Oh, it’s so good to see you,” she said. She pulled away and gave him a concerned look. “How *are* you? Narcissa said you were feeling ill, that you were resting…”

“Er—yeah,” Harry said, deciding that was not so far from the truth. “But I’m feeling fine now—what about you, and Ron—you were at the Ministry all day, with—”

“How about we don’t have this conversation right in front of the *fucking* door, hm?” Draco said softly, his smile scathing and his magic even more so. “I know tact isn’t your specialty, but honestly…”

He ushered them forward, taking them along a path that led deeper

into the garden. Harry was startled when an albino peacock strutted out of a bush, but not nearly as much as Ron, who made a strangled noise of surprise when she saw it. The bird squawked in response and ran off across the lawn.

“Try and adjust, Weasley,” Draco drawled. “You *are* celebrating your marriage here in less than a week, after all.”

“Not with those damn birds running amok,” Ron muttered. “Those things are awful—you’d have no idea, Harry, how mean a peacock can be. One was pecking at my robes when Malfoy’s mum was showing us around the other day, and when I shooed it off it screeched and tried to bite me, like I’d just insulted its precious pure-white, peacock blood purity.”

“It probably just smelled the stench on you,” Draco spat. “Don’t you have an entire farm or something ridiculous at your house, Weasley? Pigs and all that?”

Ron stopped walking. So did Draco, and they faced one another, expressions stony. “We have *chickens*,” Ron seethed. “And I haven’t been *home* in months, so you can shove your little retorts right up your—”

“Ron,” Harry interjected. They’d been alone together for less than a minute, and already they were at each other’s throats. “Don’t. He’s not worth the effort.” Which was really Harry’s way of saying, ‘He has a wand and we don’t’, but that didn’t seem a wise thing to point out. “Just… just take us to this stupid rose garden, Malfoy, so we can talk.”

“Actually, we’re almost there,” answered Hermione, to Harry’s surprise. “It’s just around the corner here.”

Harry, Ron, and Draco followed her around a tall hedge, and the garden they came upon was so resplendent that, for a moment, Harry thought he’d walked into a fairy tale. Roses, roses everywhere, in every size, shape, and color imaginable. White marble columns surrounded an intricate, tall gazebo, around which was a wide pathway. “Whoa,” Harry said, the aroma of flowers assaulting his senses. “Whoa, this is…”

“A bit much? Yeah, I thought so, too,” Ron grumbled.

“It’s called *sophistication*,” Draco said, walking beneath the canopy of the gazebo. “But don’t worry too much about it, Weasley. The peacocks and the gazebo will be removed for your wedding day. That

will be a few less refined obstacles distracting you, at least." He took a seat on one of the benches, then promptly reclined across the whole thing, as though to prevent Harry, Ron, or Hermione from sitting next to him.

"You're getting married out here?" Harry asked, speaking before Ron could snarl something vicious at Malfoy. He sat at one of the benches across from Draco, who was now examining his fingernails, looking determined to appear haughty and bored.

"Er, no, not technically," Ron said, hesitating before taking a seat next to Harry.

"The actual ceremony is happening inside… It will just be me, Ron, Mrs. Weasley, and… and you, if you're still okay with—"

"Course I am," said Harry, cutting Hermione off. She sank into a seated position at his other side and gave him another quick hug. "So out here is just…?"

"The reception, yes."

Harry looked through the openings of the lattice-like structure of the gazebo. The lawn was mostly empty—save for lush, green grass—but he could see some trees where the hedges did not obstruct his view beyond that, like sparse woods before the iron gates in the distance. Beyond that was real wilderness, and Harry's heart ached with longing at the sight of it.

But he forced that feeling aside, knowing he had more pressing things he should be asking about. "You were at the Ministry today," he said, looking at Ron.

"Yes, oh my goodness, yes," Hermione said, and Harry realized that she had not yet gotten to speak with Ron since he'd gotten back, either. "What happened? What did she make you do?"

Draco continued to stare at his nails, but he visibly tensed. Harry wondered why he was bothering to act like he wasn't curious. *"Ugh,"* Ron started with a groan, looking back and forth between the two of them. Hermione clasped his hand in hers. "It was horrible; it was worse than I ever would have imagined. I had to follow Umbridge around all day as her *personal assistant*. Honestly, I don't think I have the wherewithal to relive it all right now. And Fred and George, they were just making everything worse—"

“Worse?” Hermione asked sharply. “Worse *how*?”

“Well, Umbridge would give them a simple task, like ‘organize all these trial files in alphabetical order’, and they *would*—but you know Fred and George… They organized them all by the fourth letter of the person’s middle name who was being tried or something stupid like that, and Umbridge threw a fit—”

Draco failed to stifle a short laugh. Harry almost cracked a smile as well. “And *then* they were told to clean the floor in her office, to polish it so well it would shine—all without magic, of course, as they aren’t allowed wands either—and they *did*, but they put some strange waxy substance in the top—no idea where they got it, by the way, but George said it was something muggle—and so the floor was very slippery, and Umbridge fell on her ass first thing when she stepped inside—”

This time Harry laughed, as did Draco, but Hermione’s hand flew to her mouth, looking terrified. “It’s not funny,” said Ron gravely, and Harry’s smile fell. “Well, all right, it is a *little* funny—”

“No, it’s not,” Hermione said. “What are they thinking? Do they want to end up getting thrown in Azkaban after all?”

“They don’t seem too worried about that,” Ron muttered. “It would make him look bad, wouldn’t it? To grant mercy to pureblood rebels just to take it back a few days later… As they haven’t technically done anything wrong. You should have heard them when Umbridge was screaming at them. ‘Sorry, ma’am, you didn’t give us clear instructions’; ‘Our apologies, dear Dolores, you said to make the floor so shiny that you could see your reflection in it, and so we have…’” Ron shook his head and sighed.

“What will happen to them, then?” Harry asked. He was no longer amused; he knew that Umbridge would not tolerate such behavior long.

“Well… I don’t think it would be very hard for her to get permission to use a certain Unforgiveable as a punishment,” Ron said darkly.

“I’d imagine not,” said Draco in a much more casual tone. He sat up, no longer pretending to be disinterested. “She’ll probably have the paperwork signed to be torturing them tomorrow.”

“She’s not the *High Inquisitor* anymore,” Hermione said scathingly. “She can’t just make decisions on a whim like that.”

“No, but the Dark Lord can. Do you think he’d have any problem allowing Umbridge to cast a Cruciatus on the former hosts of *Potterwatch*?”

To this, no one responded. Hermione fidgeted where she sat, and she and Ron’s magic writhed with discomfort.

“Welcome to the glorious new regime,” Draco said blandly.

Harry glared at him. “*You* were at a Death Eater meeting today,” he said. Then he looked to Hermione, saying, “And so were you, weren’t you?”

Hermione’s magic stirred stressfully, and Ron’s brightened in alarm. “You were?” Ron said. Hermione nodded weakly.

“Yes, it was a *real* party,” Draco drawled.

Harry and Ron ignored him. “What happened?” Harry asked.

“Well, first he just sort of… he kind of talked for a long time—”

“Typical,” Draco interjected. Hermione shot him an annoyed look before continuing, saying, “And he told us that there is going to be a public address this Friday. An assembly in the atrium of the Ministry.”

Harry’s brows rose in surprise, but Ron made a sound of recognition. “Yeah, I heard some people talking about that today,” he said. “It’s going to be front page news in the *Prophet* tomorrow. Mandatory attendance for all magical people who aren’t too ill to attend.”

Harry scowled at this news. Had Voldemort been planning this already, and had just chosen not to tell Harry last night? Or was this something he had just decided this morning? Somehow, Harry doubted that it was the latter. “An assembly about what?” he asked.

“The usual,” Draco responded airily. “I know you three have been out of the loop lately, but these assemblies are going to happen relatively often now. All part of the regime’s new plan to foster a sense of *magical unity…”*

“Okay, well… what else did he say? What else happened at this meeting?”

“There was… an initiation ceremony,” Hermione said slowly. “F-for me, and… well, I don’t know who else, but three others who have

just… just recently received the M-Mark. There were maybe fifty people there all together, watching. Over fifty official Death Eaters. All in those frightening masks, of course, and long, hooded cloaks, and I had to wear all that, too, so no one could see who anyone else was. We had to swear an oath that we wouldn't tell anyone that we were Marked—barring the individuals who already know, of course—and that we would remain secretive in our loyalty… I don't know what he bothers with that anymore, to be honest; it's not like the Death Eaters need to be in hiding now. There's no fear of one Death Eater turning in another to the Ministry anymore. The Ministry is *his*."

Hermione's tone had gone from nervous to contemptuous while she spoke. "Are you serious, Granger?" Draco said. He leaned forward, and his aura was vibrant with amusement. He smirked. "You *are* the reason. Or have you not figured that out yet? Come on, think for a second. You're supposed to smart."

Hermione's face went rigid, and her magic dark. After a long moment, in a dull, emotionless voice, she said, "Because I'm a muggle-born."

Draco clapped once. "The smartest witch of her age, gentlemen," he said, brandishing an arm towards her.

Hermione, Ron, and Harry all stared at him. Draco's smirk widened, clearly enjoying having their rapt attention—hostile though it was. "Why are you all looking so shocked? You think the Dark Lord wants everyone to know that he's turned *Potter's muggle-born friend* into a Death Eater? Of course not! Least of all the *other Death Eaters*. His entire power structure is based on the pureblood families, who all despise people like you, Granger. Most of them only joined his cause because they agreed with his views on muggles and muggle-borns. He may be fine with allowing people to know he's forgiven you, with using you as the supposed proof that any muggle-born can be pardoned and accepted—as a lure to drag them back to the Ministry, of course—but that's all. There are limits. You think he's about to let the world know that you have been made a Death Eater? *Please*."

He leaned back against the gazebo wall when he was finished, folding his arms across his chest. Hermione's darkened magic had begun to stir with emotion as he spoke, and now it was a whirlwind around her; deep, burgundy waves. Harry had a tough time not inching away from her on the bench.

"That's ridiculous," Ron finally gasped.

“Is it?” Draco said. “Seems pretty logical to me. The only people who know Granger’s a Death Eater are you, Potter, my parents, and my aunt. And it would seem the Dark Lord intends on keeping it that way.”

“How is Bellatrix okay with that?” Harry asked, the thought never having occurred to him before. “She *has* to hate Hermione more than anyone…”

Harry didn’t need to list the reasons why. Hermione had stolen Bellatrix’s wand, had impersonated her to get into her vault in Gringotts, and then blasted off her arm with a dark curse days later.

“I don’t imagine it was an easy conversation,” said Draco, “but then again, maybe it was. It wouldn’t surprise me if she didn’t even question the Dark Lord’s decision. My aunt’s devotion to him is unparalleled. The Dark Lord could declare that everyday from now on shall be Christmas, and she would ask where to hang the tinsel.”

“I see. So, I’m too *filthy* to be *known* as a Death Eater by anyone else... but perfectly acceptable as some dirty little secret.” Hermione said it all in tones of deepest and ugliest sarcasm. Her expression was furious, and her magic was going wild. “And yet—and yet, he *said*—he has *no problem—”*

Hermione stopped short. She abruptly stood, and there was a very familiar air to the way in which she said, “I’m going to…”

The library, Harry finished automatically in his head, but Hermione’s expression had fallen—like she had been about to say exactly that, but then changed her mind. “Go,” she finished hollowly and vaguely. “I need to go think.”

Ron opened his mouth to say something when she turned to walk away, but Draco was faster. “Hey! You can’t just go running off, Granger! Don’t make me—!”

Hermione whipped out her wand at the exact same moment Draco did. Draco’s magic fizzled with shock, and his posture became infinitely more rigid, taking on a dueling stance. “Forgot you had a wand,” he muttered, staring down the tip which was now pointed at his face.

Harry got to his feet; he had forgotten that, too. Ron stood next to him, and they watched as Hermione smirked, taking a step closer. “That’s right. I’m a *pardoned* witch,” she said. "*I'm* not on house

arrest."

“You’re still my guest—my *problem*, more like, and I’m supposed to be playing the part of good host and keeping an eye on you lot,” Draco said—though Harry did not think drawing your wand on a guest qualified as being a good host. “So sit back down, or I’ll disarm you.”

“You sure you can do that?” Hermione said. “You sure you want to try? …Are *you* proficient at wordless incantations, Malfoy?”

Draco’s expression hardened. He didn’t say anything. “See, I am,” she went on, “so even if you do have quicker reflexes than me, the odds might not be in your favor. *Exp-ell-i-ar-mus*,” she said, slowly annunciating each syllable—but she did not do the wrist movement, so now spell came flying forth. “That’s a bit of a mouthful, isn’t it? Are you sure you want to try and disarm me and fail? Imagine if I disarm you instead… Imagine if your wand goes flying somewhere over there, maybe…”

Her eyes flickered towards Harry and Ron. They instantly stood a bit taller, probably looking like dogs who had just been told it’s time to feed, imagining, Harry was sure, the same thing—Draco’s wand flying up and out of his hands, towards one of them…

What Harry wouldn’t do to have Draco’s wand in his grasp again…

Draco swallowed thickly. He glanced back to Hermione, gave her a look of deepest loathing, and lowered his wand. “Fine. Go inside if you want. What do I care?” He went back to the gazebo and sat down. “But these two stay out here.”

“Fine. Sorry, Ron, Harry, but I really need to think. And… and you’ll just distract me.”

She had the grace to shoot them an apologetic look, and her magic was heavy with something like guilt for a moment—but then she left, pocketing her wand as she went.

Ron looked thunderstruck. “She just left us with Malfoy,” he said, looking at Harry. His magic was dim. “After she did that thing she does, where she doesn’t tell us something important.”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “She did.”

The urge to follow her was hard to ignore. Harry still had not had the

opportunity to speak with her privately, not since he found out that she knew what he was…

And what was she keeping from them *now?*

Draco laughed once she was gone. “I see a long and fortuitous marriage in your future, Weasley,” he said, grinning.

Valour

By the time night had fallen and Harry had dismissed himself—he and Ron were served dinner out in the garden, under the watchful and critical eye of Draco—Hermione had not returned. According to Narcissa, she had left the manor, but she had not said where she was going. It was baffling, Harry thought, that Hermione Granger, the muggle-born girl who had escaped the Dark Lord in a plume of phoenix fire (only after chopping off Bellatrix Lestrange's arm and detonating a significant portion of the Forbidden Forest), was now allowed such liberties… while he, Harry, was trapped in the house, a slightly more glorified prisoner than he had been a few weeks prior.

He understood it on some level, of course. Hermione wouldn't run—she had already come to the Dark Lord of her own free will, because Voldemort had Harry and Ron. She wouldn't do anything dangerous either, for the same reason. Besides, she was proclaimed a 'free witch'. Voldemort obviously hadn't given her explicit orders not to vacate the premises (though Harry suspected Voldemort had given her many orders at this point, probably concerning where she could go and who she could talk to—or *not* talk to, more like), so she could leave the manor when he wasn't using her.

Meanwhile, he and Ron were stuck. Ron, who was technically on house arrest, was not allowed to go anywhere except to the Ministry when he was working. And Harry, even though he too was supposedly free… well, he was also a horcrux. The *last* horcrux. And Voldemort couldn't have his precious tie to immortality out in the world unattended.

It was infuriating, Harry thought as he stalked back to his room. He felt terrible leaving Ron behind, lying and saying that he was feeling ill and needed to lie down. Ron was still in the foyer, waiting for Hermione to come back, and Harry knew that he would stay there all night if he had to. Harry would have liked to stay with him rather than leave him with only a house-elf for company (once Harry said he was going to bed, Draco declared that he was not 'waiting around for Granger to show up, either' and had summoned Binny to monitor Ron instead), but there was no help for it. It was nearing midnight.

He had somewhere to be.

Harry grew nervous as he approached his bedroom, wondering once more how the Dark Lord would act this evening. Voldemort had not

touched upon the connection of their souls at all last night, so Harry expected it to be… problematic.

Well, at least I still have some time to think. Harry checked his watch, seeing that it was ten minutes till midnight. Ten more minutes to prepare himself for Voldemort, to think about what he would do when he arrived, and—

Harry froze. He was still a few feet from his door when he felt it: Voldemort's magic, dark and writhing. The Dark Lord was in his room already, waiting for him. Eager. *Early*. Harry swallowed hard, his pulse picking up. *Guess I don't have time, after all.*

Harry walked slowly to the door and paused with his hand on the handle. Voldemort's aura was acting very strange indeed—it was moving in a warped way. Squirming, almost. Uneasy.

It was not a promising sign.

Harry took a deep breath and opened the door.

It wasn't difficult to act surprised by Voldemort's presence. The Dark Lord was standing in the corner of the room, his hands folded in front of his face—the same stance from the forest, from Azkaban, from the foyer while waiting for Hermione.

"Shit," Harry swore, and Voldemort's eyes flashed open, crimson and searing. "You're, ah. You're here."

Early, was the unspoken clarification, though Harry decided that it was wiser to not point this out. He closed the door and tried not to seem nervous.

Voldemort said nothing, only lowered his hands—but upon seeing Harry, his already agitated magic went *wild*. It coiled around him, undulating and edgy. It was so powerful that Harry could almost taste it; that toxic *want* that plagued Voldemort like a disease.

Even his stature was affected. Usually, the Dark Lord was an expert at keeping his physical composure, despite what his magic was doing or what he was feeling. But now, as he came closer to Harry, Voldemort did not move with his typical, haunting elegance. His body was tense, his movements less graceful. And his eyes—those searing, scarlet eyes —were fixed on Harry, bright with desire.

It was fucking terrifying, and though Harry felt the urge to run, he

didn't. He stayed where he was and waited. Voldemort crossed the room in a few long strides, but once he was in front of him, close enough to touch, he froze. His magic rippled and flashed.

"…Restraint," he whispered, like he was reminding himself.

Harry had no idea what he was supposed to do. He settled for nodding.

Voldemort lifted one arm towards Harry's face. He paused with his hand beneath his chin, his fingers hovering near Harry's throat. Voldemort's eyes were both ravenous and analytical, and they darted across Harry's features, searching. Harry hated being so intensely studied. He closed his eyes and held his breath.

A moment later, and Harry felt it—that light, warm and pleasant, sparking to life at the same moment that Voldemort touched his jaw. Just a flickering at first. A subtle touch, gentle. Harry allowed it.

Then everything went to hell.

The light exploded, so bright that Harry was blinded by it. Heat flooded his veins and Voldemort's grip on his jaw tightened; their foreheads touched and Voldemort's other arm was coiling around his waist, his magic engulfing him in an oceanic wave of blackness—Harry tried to pull away, but couldn't—

Too much, he thought, unable to speak, to move, to *breathe*. Harry felt he might pass out at any moment; this *attack* on his soul had happened so quickly that he already didn't have the strength to stop it. *Too much, too much—You're* hurting *me*—

As suddenly as it had come, the desire receded. Voldemort hadn't moved, but he'd released Harry's jaw, and the blinding light ebbed. Harry could breathe again.

The connection bridging their souls had not completely vanished, however; it remained present, a slight thrumming between them. Far more tolerable.

Voldemort's chest heaved with labored breathing. His eyes were closed and his head was bowed, keeping his forehead against Harry's. His magic continued to writhe with covetousness. He was trembling.

"…That's… This is bet—"

"Silence," Voldemort hissed. Harry shut his mouth.

Time slowly ticked by as Voldemort stood there with him, his magic and spine both quivering as he lightly tapped into the connection which bound their souls. His magic gradually filled with relief, glimmering more and more with gold. Nearly ten minutes had passed before his aura quieted and his body became still. Voldemort finally lifted his head and opened his eyes.

Unsure if he was allowed to talk yet—and having no idea what to say anyway—Harry didn't do anything. The slight warmth of their bond continued to pulse. Voldemort threaded his long fingers into Harry's hair, and it thrummed a bit brighter. "Is this… endurable?" he asked.

The heat that scoured Harry's face had nothing at all to do with souls. "I… I guess."

"Good.

"D-do you have to do that, though?" Harry asked weakly. "T… Touch me, like that?"

His face burned hotter. Voldemort smirked, continuing to stroke his hair like he was a cherished pet. "You like it," he said.

A statement which was in no way an answer to Harry's question. Harry glowered. "No, *you* like it," he spat back. Harry shoved his arm away, surprised when Voldemort let it happen. The light flowing between them lessened but didn't dissipate.

"Yes," Voldemort agreed. "I do. I like touching you very, *very* much." His lips curled on one side, and his magic gleamed—amused, probably, and how red Harry was turning. Harry wished he hadn't asked. "And you like being touched by me, my horcrux."

"I do not," Harry snapped.

"Such *lies*, Harry," Voldemort murmured, looking far too arrogant.

Harry took a step back, scowling, and the light radiating between them vanished altogether. Harry thought to say, 'You can go now, then, if you're done' or, much more satisfying and far stupider, 'Get the fuck out of my room, you psychotic, creepy arse', but he didn't.

A wand, Harry reminded himself. *Don't let him fluster you, don't piss him off. Just shut up and get through the week, and you'll have a wand.*

Except, Harry wasn't very good at holding his tongue, especially not after the way Hermione had acted earlier. Knowing it was a stupid idea to launch into a conversation with Voldemort—he would inevitably twist his words and make Harry want to smash a vase over his head—Harry took a deep breath and said, "You're having an assembly on Friday."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Assemblies which bring together the magical community of Britain are important, Harry," Voldemort answered. "They give the Ministry the opportunity to proclaim new protocol; they foster a sense of unity —"

"I know all that," Harry seethed. Voldemort only smirked at the interruption. "I meant why are you having one this Friday, suddenly. A mandatory one this week."

Voldemort didn't answer right away. With each second that passed in silence, Harry wanted to tear his hair out a little bit more.

Don't shout. Don't so anything stupid. That's what he wants you to do. Don't do it.

"…Because I wanted to have one before the wedding of Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley."

"Why?"

"I realized it would be beneficial."

Harry's hands clenched into fists, his nails biting into his skin. Voldemort was, predictably, not going to give him any details.

"You will be present as well," Voldemort continued, to Harry's surprise. He couldn't have looked more entertained at how Harry struggled to keep his composure. "As will Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger. All three of you will be in attendance… At my side."

"*At your side?"* Harry repeated.

"Along with several of my closest followers, yes."

Harry's mind reeled at the implications of this. Voldemort was content

to watch him as he digested this information, his magic swirling back and forth in flashes, black and gold.

“You want me to say something, don’t you,” Harry concluded, not meeting his eyes. “To read some scripted speech on your behalf.”

For why else would the Dark Lord want the three of them next to his known Death Eaters? What better way to prove that he had so completely won the war then to have Harry Potter say so himself? And not as a victim on trial, but as a free man, pardoned of all his supposed crimes, his friends at his side… currently living with the Malfoy family, being rehabilitated…

Voldemort’s magic glistened brilliantly. “You?” he said, and his tone was so surprised that Harry looked up, meeting his gaze. “You think I would have *you* deliver a speech to all of wizarding Britain? You, who struggled with your one line during the last *Potterwatch* broadcast? You, who cannot even make it through the atrium on the way to your trial without disobeying my command and swearing at reporters? Don’t be absurd, Harry.”

“I don’t regret that,” Harry snapped. “I’d say it to her again, if I could.”

“Surely my reluctance to have you anywhere near a podium is not a mystery, then.”

Harry glowered but didn't speak again. Voldemort was not Rita Skeeter; swearing at him tended to have damning consequences.

“No, Harry, your task is only to be present. You shall not be expected to say a single word during the assembly. No scripted speeches.” Voldemort’s magic glinted more lustrously, a familiar radiance, and Harry knew he was not going to like whatever he said next.

“…That task has been delegated to Hermione Granger.”

“What?”

Voldemort smiled.

“What do you mean, Hermione is going to be giving a speech?” Harry asked, furious when Voldemort, yet again, failed to explain. “What are you going to make her say? And why her?”

“Envious, Harry, that the you haven’t been trusted with such an

honor?"

"Envious? *Honor?* What are you—why would I—*you*—"

Harry stopped talking. He turned away and closed his eyes, trying to ignore the way Voldemort's magic sparkled more and more merrily. *A wand.*

"What are you going to make Hermione say?" Harry asked once he could speak calmly.

"Nothing which hasn't been said before," Voldemort answered. "Along with some more… personal details. But the repeated content takes on a far more significant meaning, considering the source. Hermione Granger is a muggle-born, one who everyone knows is dear friends with Harry Potter. She will be the lure to coax the others out of hiding. To bring them back within my domain, under my rule… and to be dealt with accordingly."

Harry was beside himself. It was no wonder, then, that Hermione had been so upset. Voldemort had branded her and forced her to become a Death Eater, yet kept it a secret from nearly everyone that she was one because of her blood status. Despite this, he had no issues commanding that she give a speech for him. One that he had no doubt carefully written so that, coming from the mouth of a well-known muggle-born girl—the best friend of Harry Potter, the brightest witch of her age—would do exactly as he hoped it would: Lure other witches and wizards who either were muggle-born or simply could not prove their magical heritage back to the Ministry, thinking that they could register and have their lives back.

But would they? Harry wondered very much about what Voldemort's plans were now for muggle-borns. He was accepting Hermione Granger and intended to use her, but what of the others? Would he really allow all muggle-borns into his new regime if they pledged loyalty to him? And under what circumstances?

Harry wanted to ask all these questions, but he took in the way Voldemort's magic was glittering and his haughty grin and decided—no. He knew that look. He recognized the manner in which his aura was dancing. Voldemort was just waiting for Harry to speak again, but he wouldn't give him any useful information.

No, what Voldemort undoubtedly wanted to do was get a rise out of him. To make him do something stupid and have a reason to deny him a wand. Harry wouldn't fall for it.

"…Okay," Harry said.

Voldemort looked mildly surprised. Harry offered no further reaction other than to fold his arms across his chest. He looked towards the door—a silent but obvious gesture that he was waiting for Voldemort to leave.

Several long, agonizing seconds passed, and Harry's heart sped as he wondered what Voldemort would do. His magic was curling erratically, like he was conflicted. Harry envisioned something horrible happening and braced himself.

Voldemort then closed the gap between them and Harry jumped at the suddenness of it. The Dark Lord twisted his fingers back in Harry's hair, grabbing him by it, though not roughly enough to hurt him. He leaned down, speaking in Harry's ear when he said, *"Good boy."*

The *smugness*—the overwhelming, horrendous *smugness* that radiated about him was sickening. Harry wanted to punch him, to headbutt him, to kick him in the shin, to scream in his *handsome fucking face*—

Harry did nothing. Voldemort's sly grin faded, and his magic changed in another way which Harry recognized well. He remembered it from back when Voldemort would visit him in his cell, when the Dark Lord was still hideous and Harry Potter a blinded, miserable prisoner.

Disappointed.

Then, just as it had in his cell, that feeling disappeared, replaced by something else. Voldemort's magic brightened back up, this time with a sense of expectation. Like it was saying, *Next time*.

He flashed Harry one last, sadistic grin. "Until tomorrow night, Harry," he murmured, his lips so close to Harry's ear they grazed it. Then he vanished.

The moment he was gone, Harry let out an audible breath, bending over and leaning on his knees like he had just sprinted a great distance. *I did it,* he thought, then laughed with relief. He had managed to get through an evening with Voldemort without shouting or breaking something. He, Harry James Potter, had controlled himself.

Then Harry remembered that it was only Monday evening, and his laughter turned into a groan.

I need to talk to Hermione alone.

This was the thought that repeated itself in Harry's mind, but as the days went on, it seemed that the universe, in every conceivable way, was working against him so that this would not happen.

The first obstacle was the inconvenient fact that Hermione was a Death Eater, one that the Dark Lord was watching closely, and so he tended to have her summoned away during the day. Draco was often not around either—making up whatever excuses he could to escape the manor and his mother, who only grew more hysterical as the wedding drew nearer.

Which was the second obstacle, because if they were in the manor, Narcissa frequently pulled Hermione and Ron (who both looked at Narcissa with fear-filled eyes) away with her to get their opinions on things. The poor wedding planners were just as afraid, and Harry couldn't blame any of their reactions. Narcissa was a force to behold; it was not hard to figure out why Lucius had vanished, leaving his son to cover for him.

Then there was the issue of Ron. Harry hated to think of his best friend as an inconvenience, but Ron was another serious obstacle when it came to talking to Hermione by herself. Which wasn't to say the conversations between the three of them were not meaningful; it was just that they were very… limited, in terms of what Harry wanted to talk about.

Once Hermione returned to the manor, she had admitted to being forced to speak at the assembly. It was news which had infuriated Ron, naturally, and Harry had needed to act equally enraged and surprised by. But even though she told them she had been given a speech to memorize, Hermione would not give them details when they asked.

"It's about what you would think it is, honestly," she'd explained glumly. "It's an address about how outdated some of the Ministry's old policies are, how crucial it is for us to stand together in magic unity, things like that… but it's the end of the speech that surprised me." She'd given Ron and Harry a deploring look. "It's all this talk about how ambition and power are the most important things, and how we should all be unified in them… And I think… I think it's a set up. I think he plans to speak after me and announce that there will be no more sorting at Hogwarts. That it shall just be 'Slytherin.'"

Which was an extremely depressing thought—but when Harry and Ron would ask her to recite exactly what Voldemort wanted her to say to make her think that, she would get frustrated, shake her head, and leave them, saying she needed space to 'think'.

Harry therefore had many more opportunities to speak with Ron alone—discussions which turned out to be even more exasperating than talking to Hermione, and which often left Harry in a sour mood. Ron, who was out in the world, able to see for himself what was going on in the heart of the Ministry, would discuss it very little.

"It's horrible, Harry," he'd mutter under his breath, unable to look him in the eye. "Horrible. And Fred and George on are thin ice; they're going to get us all tortured if they keep things up like they are…"

Yet when Harry would ask about what specifically was so horrible, Ron would be vague, only saying that there were trials—but Harry could tell he was lying. There were more than trials happening at the Ministry, and for whatever reason, Ron felt he could not tell Harry about it. Was it because it was just so terrible, and Ron didn't think Harry could handle it? Or was it because Harry now had red eyes, and Ron could not look at him without thinking of the Dark Lord? Did he no longer trust him because of it?

The one time Harry was about to call him out, to lose his temper on his closest friend and demand that he talk to him, Ron had made a sudden sobbing sound and given Harry something real.

"I'm such a moron, Harry," he'd said, tears gathering in his eyes—but still not able to look at him for more than a moment. "I just… this wedding, it's the worst thing. There haven't been many muggle-borns coming into the Ministry willingly—they're nearly all caught by Snatchers—but *Umbridge* suspects that there will be many more… after this assembly. *After my wedding.* And I think she's right. She's fucking right. People will hear this address on the WWN, hear Hermione speaking, and they'll see these pictures of her and me and you and everyone looking happy at the wedding, and they'll think things really are okay. They'll think it's safe to come out of hiding. But it's not."

Ron had buried his head in his hands. "And to think, I was excited at the idea of it, but I hadn't thought it through. I j-just needed something to cling to, you know? Something to be happy about. But's it's h-horrible, and there's nothing we can do, and I'm *such a moron*…"

Harry hadn't had the heart to be mad at him after that. If Ron couldn't confide in him whatever horrors he was witnessing at the Ministry, fine. Harry was bound to find out soon enough.

Besides, it wasn't like he wasn't keeping his secrets of his own.

It was awful, really, the way their relationships had shifted. Before, when they had been out in the woods, searching for horcruxes, there had been next to no secrecy. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had shared everything, putting all their knowledge out on the table, trying to solve the world's greatest problems on their own.

Now, they were all hiding things from each other, and blatantly so. Hermione would not (or could not) talk about what Voldemort wanted her to say and do. Ron would not (or could not) discuss details of the goings-on at the Ministry concerning the Muggle Born Registration.

And Harry wasn't about to tell his best friends about his interactions with Voldemort.

The next several nights passed with great tension but, thankfully, *somehow*, nothing drastic happened. The Dark Lord did not arrive early again, nor did he breech the bond of their souls in a manner which was unbearable for Harry, and Harry, therefore, was not reduced to a frail being the following morning. Voldemort seemed to be much better at controlling himself when he knew Harry could be hurt.

Meanwhile, Harry was much better at reigning in his temper when the mantra *a wand, a wand, a wand* resounded in his mind.

Not that Voldemort didn't *try* to get a rise out of Harry. He would make sly comments—a few words referencing the assembly on Friday; this other 'big development'; verbal morsels resembling facts which were purposefully vague, trying to get Harry to ask—but Harry wouldn't let it work. He knew everything Voldemort said was a trick to get him into a conversation, one that would result in no meaningful information and Harry inevitably saying something he'd regret.

So, Harry would only nod, stand there, and wait for Voldemort to leave. Eventually he would, but always with that infuriating sense of arrogance. *Next time.*

But there are only a few more nights of this.

It was Thursday evening, and the Dark Lord had just disappeared,

having lingered longer than usual. He'd tried a different tactic in his attempts to make Harry act out tonight. This time, once he'd called forth that light, Voldemort had maneuvered himself so that he had Harry backed up against the vanity. Which, naturally, made Harry think of what happened *last* time he was pressed against that mahogany surface, and had made him turn a brilliant scarlet.

Voldemort hadn't said a word. Instead of carding his fingers through his hair, as was his tendency, Voldemort had held Harry by the waist with both hands, pushing him against the vanity and leaning down with his face very near to Harry's. Several times, Harry was certain that the Dark Lord was going to kiss him—a notion which kept Harry's heart slamming against his ribcage the entire time—but he never did. He only basked in the warmth which Harry's soul offered, then lightly touched his lips to the scar on Harry's forehead before he left.

Harry had fallen to the ground like a piece of paper being crumpled the moment he was gone. His heart pounded for a long time afterwards, and it was still thundering in his ears as he forced himself not to let his mind wander to dark, dangerous places—to focus on what was important.

A few more nights and this assembly and wedding will be over. And I'll have a wand.

Harry stood, his heart rate slowly returning to normal. Everything would be different once this weekend was over. He would get through it. *They* would get through it—he and Ron and Hermione—and when Sunday arrived, they would figure things out, talk about what their next moves were. Together.

One thing at a time.

The Ministry was bursting with magic.

Harry could feel it, the swelling of thousands of magical auras, though he could not currently see those to whom they belonged. He, Ron, and Hermione had not yet crossed the threshold onto the stage, where a slew of prominent Death Eaters and politicians already stood, and where Voldemort currently spoke.

He'd been prepared for this moment. The magnitude of this assembly had been made clear, and the instructions had been precise. When to walk onto stage. Where to stand, how to stand. Where to look, where not to look. It was a lot of work, Harry thought, to 'be present'.

The Dark Lord certainly knew how to create a scene, Harry would give him that.

No one had yet seen him, Hermione, or Ron, and they did not look anything like they usually did. Harry was dressed in his new, dark robes which had been tailor made for him, looking as proper as he ever did. Ron too looked much more refined than usual, his hair trimmed, clean, and perfect. But it was Hermione who had made the most drastic transformation. Her bushy hair was sleek and smooth, tied into an elegant knot on her head, much like how she'd styled it at the Yule Ball. She wore make-up, too, which was a rarity for her, and was donning black robes with long, flowing sleeves.

They would make quite a picture when the world saw them, and Voldemort wanted that moment to be special, to have as much of an impact as possible. Therefore, Harry, Ron, and Hermione had been brought to the Ministry via a private floo connection, one which shielded them from the eyes of nearly the entirety of Wizarding Britain which was gathered in the atrium. They were hidden from view behind a curtain, watching from the sidelines as the Dark Lord addressed the crowd, waiting for their cue.

From where they currently stood, they could only see the Death Eaters standing at attention. This included Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrange, Yaxley, Dolohov, Thicknesse (whom Harry assumed was still under the Imperius), and Lucius Malfoy. Harry was surprised to see Lucius. He wondered if Narcissa would succeed in catching him once the assembly was over, dragging him back home before he could slip away again. She and her son were somewhere in the audience, presumably near the front, in a place of prominence.

Only the Dark Lord's most faithful, influential followers were gathered on stage with him, watching him with looks of deepest reverence and awe as he spoke to the crowd.

And *how* he spoke.

Even Harry, loathe as he was to admit it, was engrossed. While he was sure that whatever he was saying was interesting—and positive that Hermione was memorizing every word as he said them—it was the way he spoke that had Harry captivated. His physical stature, the manner in which his eyes blazed. And his *magic*. Harry had seen Voldemort's magic react intensely before, no doubt, but this was the most animated he'd ever seen it. Voldemort's aura was whirling with passion with every sentence, captivatingly so. An intoxicating vigor. It

was no wonder Voldemort could gain such support despite how dark some of his ideals were; his ardor was infectious.

"…Forgiveness, mercy, and clemency are all vital aspects to the healing of our broken and damaged culture," Voldemort was saying, and Harry was snapped out of his stupor. Those words in particular reached him, not only because of what they were—broken and damaged—but because this was the moment. A few more lines, and they would need to walk out there, displayed for the world to see.

Hermione, who was standing between him and Ron, suddenly gripped both their arms. Voldemort's words faded into the background when she said, "I need you to back me up."

Her magic brightened sharply. Harry and Ron shot her alarmed looks. "What?" they said at the same time.

"I am going to do something," Hermione said, looking resolutely at the podium where the Dark Lord stood, about to say the words which meant it was time. "I am going to say something and do something and I need you to promise me right now that you will back me up and follow my lead, okay?"

She looked first to Ron, whose face and magic were both wild with confusion, but then she stared at Harry, pleadingly. Ron may have been put off by looking at Harry in the eye for more than a moment, but Hermione wasn't. She didn't blink as she waited for him to say something.

They only had a few seconds.

"Okay," said Harry, having no clue what he'd just agreed to.

She looked to Ron. He nodded as well, and Hermione released them, smiling anxiously.

"…towards reconciliation… and towards a harmonious future."

Voldemort stepped back from the podium and turned, looking behind the curtain, his aura glistening with expectation.

Harry went first.

The reaction of being seen was instant; it was worse even than the trial. Gasps and murmurs rippled across the crowd. Cameras flashed. Magical auras danced and flickered and swirled. Harry Potter, walking

onto a stage filled with former Death Eaters and Lord Voldemort, followed closely by Ronald Weasley. Harry couldn't look at anyone in the crowd; he knew he would not be able to do this if he saw certain faces.

Instead, Harry kept his focus trained on those already on the stage. He was supposed to acknowledge them, to show respect by shaking their hands, like they were all on such wonderful terms now. Bellatrix was the first in line. She smiled at him sadistically when he shook her hand, and Harry truly feared that he might ruin everything by vomiting on stage.

He held it together, though, and the others were not as difficult. Rodolphus, Dolohov, Yaxley, the mindless Minister. Lucius Malfoy, who gripped Harry's hand and gave him what Harry imagined was meant to be a fatherly smile.

Then there was Voldemort.

No one shook hands with *him* as a greeting—such a gesture was far too familiar. Harry grit his teeth when he approached Voldemort, whose face remained pleasantly neutral, but whose magic was whirling with emotion. Harry stopped in front of him, and, with the whole of wizarding Britain watching, did what he was supposed to do.

He bowed.

It wasn't the same, subservient bow that he'd been instructed to do. Harry's eyes never left Voldemort's as he stiffly and shallowly bowed before him, not bending at the waist nearly as much as his Death Eaters or anyone else did. Voldemort didn't seem to mind. His aura gleamed and he smirked, looking satisfied.

It hardly mattered that Voldemort was using Occlumency against him —Harry knew exactly what the Dark Lord was thinking in that moment. He had been unable to get Harry to bow to him by force years ago, using an Unforgivable Curse in the graveyard… but he succeeded now.

A wand, Harry thought furiously, taking his place at the end of the line—which was, unfortunately, beside Bellatrix. Ron had to make the same greetings as Harry, though his bow to Voldemort was far more appropriate. When he was done, he stood beside Harry and they faced the crowd, but Harry kept his focus over their heads. *Get through this weekend, and you'll get a wand.*

The crowd quieted. Harry knew what they expected. Without looking at them, he knew that every pair of eyes in the Ministry was currently fixed on him, Harry Potter. They assumed he would take to the podium and speak at any moment.

Hermione took it instead.

The reaction when Hermione took the stage was nearly as profound as when Harry and Ron had. People were shocked to see her, and Harry wondered, would they recognize her? Would those who had known her before see the same Hermione Granger at all, without her bushy hair and easy smile?

But of course they would. The moment she began to speak, there would be no doubt in anyone's mind that it was her. Hermione did not look at Harry, Ron, nor anyone on the stage as she walked straight to the podium. She was to speak first and pay respect to those behind her after.

The crowd went eerily silent as she stood before them. The microphone—which was broadcasting every word live on the WWN—gleamed with magic. The flags bearing the Dark Lord's new emblem hung heavy and still above their heads; the sculpture of a witch and wizard sitting upon a throne of muggles shone in the atrium like a beacon. The only sound which could be heard was that of the cameras, bright flashes that refused to stop. Hermione's magic was quivering, but after she drew in a deep breath, her voice was steady.

"I have come today to speak of the unsettling truth," she began. Harry's heartbeat drummed in his ears; what was she planning, what had she meant by 'backing her up'? "To encourage shedding light on matters which have, for a very long time, been shrouded by confusion and misconception; wrongs which have been plaguing our society for hundreds of years, ever since witches and wizards have recognized that they are too different from non-magical people to be transparent with their abilities. Policies which were set in motion long before our time—which have shifted throughout the years, bleeding into our present, threatening our future."

She paused. Harry swore no one was breathing. Even the camera flashes stopped. "My name is Hermione Jean Granger," Hermione said, and for the first time, her voice did not sound so firm. She swallowed and went on. "I am a muggle-born witch. Like all magical children born from non-magical parents, I was visited by a Hogwarts representative after my eleventh birthday. Any muggle-born, I am

sure, can relate very strongly with what a sense of relief this explanation provided. Before this visit, I had no idea that I was a witch. My magic manifested in my youth—just as it does in all of us—but armed with no knowledge of my abilities, these instances were not causes for celebration. They were causes for alarm.

“Four times I cast magic as a child, but twice, my memory was tampered with. Once when I was six and once when I was eight. I had unknowingly performed magic in front of muggles. Ministry officials came both of these times—adult witches and wizards who knew exactly what I was. Rather than explain, they erased the memory from my mind, as well as those of the muggles who witnessed the magic I performed. These memories are kept on file within the Ministry of Magic. Until this week, I had no idea that this happened to me. Until just a few days ago, after I registered as a muggle-born witch and had my wand returned to me, I was not aware that my mind had been tampered with before I ever received my Hogwarts letter. This happens to all muggle-born children.”

Harry listened, his heart still thrumming but not yet panicked. Was all this true, or a fabrication? Harry didn’t know, but Hermione said it all convincingly.

Voldemort’s aura was glistening but calm. Thus far, everything she had said was what he intended her to say. This was all going according to his plan. Hermione went on. “This travesty—affecting the memories of young children, which, if not done precisely, can result in mental damage—is just one of many policies which the Ministry of Magic approved of decades ago. A procedure meant to uphold the Statute of Secrecy, one which places a higher priority on keeping our true nature from muggles than it does the welfare of magical children.

“The unsettling truth, the reality which the Ministry of Magic has long been content to ignore, is that the Statute of Secrecy becomes more fragile with each passing day. If we wish to retain our way of life as magical beings, then drastic measures must be taken. We are witches, we are wizards. We are sorcerers with exceptional abilities, magic that is both mysterious and powerful—and each one of us is unique. It is the responsibility of muggle-borns to register within the Ministry of Magic so that we may be more fully enveloped into this culture to which we belong.”

There was a pause in which Hermione’s magic undulated and darkened. Harry could tell that whatever she said next would not be easy for her. “Those who do not report willingly to the Ministry of

Magic shall be assumed to be criminals. The fact that magic may be stolen from witches or wizards with magical lineage remains a threat. Those who do not turn themselves in to the Muggle-Born Registration Committee shall be assumed to have committed this atrocious act. For what other reason would one choose to flee from the society to which they truly belong?

"Those born naturally with sporadic magic have nothing to fear. This is our home; our proper place in this world. The Ministry of Magic under the new regime is not a cause for despair, as I once believed myself. I see now the error of my ways, and I am sure many of us who once supported Albus Dumbledore feel the same. We were lied to. We were manipulated. No more. United in power, we shall face the future as one. Our ambition must be great, and it must be focused. Magic *is* might."

Voldemort's magic sang with satisfaction, and Harry was sure the speech was over. Hermione would thank the audience for listening to her, would turn and shake the hands of murderers and fellow Death Eaters, bow before her Lord, and the assembly would be done.

"…However."

Everything changed.

Suddenly, Hermione's aura became very bright and twitchy. Inversely, Voldemort's magic—which had been glimmering so merrily before—froze. Harry's breath hitched, though his heart rate sped.

She was going off script.

"Power is only useful in capable hands. One cannot isolate the might of magic and rely solely on its strength for progression. Many qualities are necessary for the advancement of a just and better world… one which we must build together."

Voldemort's magic jolted back to life, this time emanating a horrid, wrathful energy. It reminded Harry of when he had first branded her with the Dark Mark, it was so dark. But he didn't move, couldn't. Hermione was on a podium in front of the whole wizarding community.

He could only do as much as the rest of them: Listen.

"Power must be handled with caution, and executed with wisdom. Knowledge is of equal importance," Hermione continued, gaining

confidence with every word. “We must be aware of where our strengths and weaknesses lie, and willing to acknowledge our shortcomings when we have them. We must look out for our magical comrades; we must work to foster a sense of unity no matter what one’s blood status or family lineage may be. If a witch or wizard has registered with the Ministry, then they are a part of our society. We must be willing to work hard to be united, letting go of past prejudices which are as outdated as so many Ministry protocols. Loyalty, like knowledge, is of equal importance as power.”

Voldemort’s aura was going *insane*, but Harry found himself grinning. He was beginning to understand where Hermione was going with this. “And yet, none of these necessary qualities will matter if we are afraid. We cannot fear failure. We must have the courage to face the obstacles that we shall surely face as we turn towards the future. Power, knowledge, and loyalty must be wielded with bravery. So I implore you, my brothers and sisters, bound by magic, to join me.”

Hermione lifted her arm to her chest and held it over her heart. Then, after a moment where she seemed to inhale a great breath, she thrust that same arm up into the air.

Her left arm.

Hermione’s sleeve slid down below her elbow, revealing the black, recently branded Dark Mark.

“For Voldemort and Valour!”

A crackle of magic stirred the air. The Taboo being triggered, Harry realized—but what a predicament! All the Snatchers were somewhere in this audience, and Hermione was on stage, at the Ministry. Silence rang in the wake of her declaration and the display of her Dark Mark; the loudest and tensest silence Harry had ever experienced. Auras were vibrating everywhere with uncertainty and confusion. Even Voldemort’s aura had ceased in its furious writhing at such a bold, unexpected statement. It hung suspended around him; Voldemort was, perhaps for the first time in years, in a state of total shock.

Hermione glanced over her shoulder, her arm still raised. She looked back and forth between Harry and Ron with panic in her eyes.

Back me up. Follow my lead.

Harry looked at Ron, and without words, without so much as a nod, understood. They got to their feet at the same time and did exactly as

Hermione did—they touched their left hands to their chests, then thrust their arms up into the air.

"For Voldemort and Valour!"

Another crackling of magic from triggering the Taboo. Hermione grinned. Harry didn't dare look at Voldemort, but when Bellatrix's magic brightened beside him—*Merlin*, it really did look and feel so much like Hermione's—he looked at her. Bellatrix's eyes darted from Hermione, to Harry and Ron, then back again. Harry could sense what was going to happen just before it did.

Because Bellatrix, like everyone else in this atrium, would never for a second think that any part of this assembly was outside of the Dark Lord's control. She, like everyone else, assumed this was a part of his plan. One of his orders, a proclamation that he expected Hermione Granger to make, and then Harry and Ron—the first to give voice to the newest mantra of his regime. He wanted his name to be spoken like an oath. There was no other possible reasoning.

And Bellatrix Lestrange would be damned if she wasn't one of the very first as well. She turned towards her master, touched her hand to her chest, then thrust her arm into the air. Her real one, the arm which was branded with the Dark Mark.

"For Voldemort and Valour!"

Harry still didn't chance looking at Voldemort, but his magic was spasming in a way that, under other circumstances, might have made Harry laugh. Harry suspected he knew what was going to happen now, too, and he was powerless to stop it.

The other Death Eaters—as well as Thicknesse—followed the lead of Voldemort's deadliest lieutenant. They touched their hearts, they raised their arms.

"For Voldemort and Valour!"

Hermione beamed. She turned and faced the crowd again, then repeated the action and the mantra. *"For Voldemort and Valour!"*

The crowd was no longer confused nor hesitant. Not doing what was so clearly expected of them from their Lord was not an option.

"For Voldemort and Valour!" the crowd bellowed, alongside Hermione. Magic stirred viciously in the air. Harry could *feel* the Taboo cracking

—it was probably not meant to withstand such a volume… and Harry had a feeling Hermione was very aware of this.

"For Voldemort and Valour!" they shouted again, and this time Harry, Ron, and the others on stage joined in, too. Hermione's magic was blooming with triumph. Harry, despite everything, was smiling wider than he had in weeks.

By pointing out the qualities which represented the other Houses of Hogwarts as important, Hermione Granger had destroyed any chance of Voldemort announcing that sorting would be discontinued. By revealing her Dark Mark—without breaking any vows, without saying anything! Just by letting her sleeve fall down! *It was so simple!*—she had made it so that, at the very least, it would be much more difficult for the Dark Lord to discriminate against muggle-borns. She was one, and she had also been marked as a Death Eater, one of Voldemort's closest followers.

Anything was possible.

"For Voldemort and Valour!"

By putting his name in a mantra that would be repeated by nearly all of Britain's wizards and witches, she had destroyed the Taboo. Harry could feel it cracking more every time it was spoken, and Hermione had them shouting it with her, over and over.

"For Voldemort and Valour!"

And to top it all off, she had bound Voldemort's infamous name with a word that mean bravery. A *Gryffindor* quality.

Hermione, you brilliant, crazy girl, Harry thought, continuing to cry out with the rest of them. He finally looked at Voldemort. The Dark Lord wore a smile fixed on his face, and it was impossible to tell if he was murderous or pleased. His magic was just as conflicted, clashing with emotions. None of this was meant to happen, but at the same time, the whole of wizard Britain was shouting for *him*. Unified under *his* name, under *his* regime.

"For Voldemort and Valour!"

The crowd grew louder; the Taboo shattered.

"For Voldemort and Valour!"

“For Voldemort and Valour!”

“For Voldemort and Valour!”

The world was his.

Final Preparations

Things really weren't going according to the pre-determined plan.

What was supposed to happen was this: Hermione would give her speech. She would then step aside, show her respects to the Dark Lord and his followers, and allow Voldemort to once more take the spotlight—presumably to announce the end of all sorting. Harry, Hermione and Ron were then to be ushered from the stage and returned to Malfoy Manor, where they would spend the remainder of the day preparing for the wedding tomorrow.

This was not what happened.

The bellowing cry of 'For Voldemort and Valour!' seemed endless, and there was no opportunity for a follow-up speech. The crowd was on the precipice of a frenzy, cheering for the idea of the harmony and prosperity they so dearly wished to see. They shouted Voldemort's name, but their affection was just as great for Harry, Ron, and, of course, Hermione.

Voldemort couldn't escape it, and he didn't seem keen on letting everyone else escape it, either. It was difficult to tell if he was furious or not; his magic was too agitated. Was it so uncomfortably animated because he was incensed, or because he did not expect to be as pleased as he was at the sound of all of wizarding Britain shouting his name? The same name he had crafted; the same name he had been so intent on getting every witch and wizard to *fear* speaking?

The smile on his face—one Harry could tell was fixed, but which surely photographed charmingly—did nothing to reveal his true feelings, either.

Hermione finally stepped back from the podium, though the shouting continued. She looked hopefully to Lucius, who was the one who was supposed to escort them back to his home. Then she gasped, her arm twitching. Harry felt a twinge in his scar at the exact same moment, and he could only assume that Voldemort had used his connection through her mark to cause her a short, sharp sting of pain. Hermione's focus shifted to Voldemort, his magic glistening, and there was a moment where she looked afraid. Harry's heart froze.

But the moment was over quickly; a few seconds later and Hermione was smiling and walking over to the Dark Lord, bowing deeply.

Voldemort nodded and smiled as well, beaming for the cameras which flashed like crazy, and the crowds erupted in applause, which finally ended the chanting. Harry was utterly confused. The interaction was clearly forced—for as bright as their grins were, Voldemort's magic was dark and convoluted, and Hermione's was absolutely quaking with fear.

So why had she just acted that way, despite being afraid? It was as if an entire conversation had just happened between them; like Voldemort had just threatened her, reminding her of the role she had to play…

Because that's exactly what happened, Harry realized. Whether through Legilimency or through the dark magic which now connected Hermione to Voldemort, Voldemort had communicated with her in some manner. And Harry was certain the instructions had not been kind.

"We're leaving, then?" Ron said, speaking through a smile that looked far too fake. He was pale, and his hands shook as he nonetheless clapped along with everyone else. "To go back to the Manor?"

He'd directed his inquiry to Lucius, but it was Voldemort who answered.

"No," he said, and when his eyes flickered briefly to Ron's, his whole body jolted. "You shall be remaining at the Ministry with me and several others. As shall Miss Granger. Consider it… a change of plans."

His magic glittered and his gaze flashed to Harry. Harry's blood turned frigid he remembered the last time Voldemort had said those words—when he had his cold, cold hands wrapped around Harry's jaw in the Forbidden Forest. When he had looked like a serpentine monster and spoken with a high voice, his blood smelling like ice and blood.

When he had decided that no, Harry Potter would not be dying.

"Lucius," Voldemort said, his eyes not leaving Harry's face. "Take Harry back to the manor. Now. The rest of you… stay."

Before Harry could even think of how to voice his protest, Lucius had grabbed him by the elbow and was ushering him off stage. He did so with finesse—he smiled radiantly at the nearest cameras and, jutting Harry discreetly in the ribs, muttered, "Smile, boy," in a manner which barely caused his lips to move at all.

Frazzled, Harry managed a half-smile that he was sure looked truly terrible at the next camera that assaulted them. Lucius's quick pace had them behind the curtain a moment later, concealed from the crowd and on their way to the private floo they had taken in.

"Hey—stop, let me go—I'm not *leaving* them here—"

Lucius did let Harry go when he pulled his arm away, but he also whipped his wand out, causing Harry to freeze. Lucius's pleasant disposition turned cold, and his magic was like a steel sheet around him.

"You *are* leaving them here. You are coming back with me to my manor, as the Dark Lord has instructed, and you will stay there. Unless you want something tragic to happen to your friends by defying him, you will not force me to curse you in order to follow his instructions." He paused, his lips twitching before adding, "And I *will* curse you, Potter."

Harry swallowed hard and considered this. There was clear animosity in his eyes—despite recent events, it seemed Lucius was a far cry away from forgetting that Harry had ruined his favor with the Dark Lord years ago and had been the reason he'd gone to Azkaban. He looked like he would like nothing more than a reason to knock Harry unconscious… or worse. If Harry retaliated in any way, he'd be giving him the excuse… not to mention giving the Dark Lord an excuse to keep a wand from him.

Something which I desperately wish I had right about now, Harry thought bitterly. If he'd had a wand, he had no doubts that he'd have been able to pull his out faster than Lucius Malfoy could have, and then who would be threatening who?

But Harry didn't have a wand… not yet.

Harry looked longingly back towards the stage, where the cheering had not yet died down; where Hermione and Ron were now trapped with a bunch of Death Eaters for the whole world to see. What would Voldemort have them do?

And what could Harry do to stop it?

"Now, Potter," Lucius hissed.

Harry turned reluctantly back to the man before him, whose magic was beginning to froth with impatience. Harry didn't like the

conclusion he came to.

Nothing. There was nothing he could do for now but keep his head down and go along with the madness.

Harry nodded curtly, once. Lucius smirked and lowered his wand, though he didn't pocket it. "A wise decision," he said silkily.

The first thing Lucius did upon depositing Harry back into his foyer was summon his house-elf. Binny was given instructions to make sure that Harry remained in the manor and was well taken care of—as usual. Lucius then left before Harry could so much as scowl at him, disappearing into the emerald flames of his fireplace, going wherever it was Lucius Malfoy went when he was avoiding his home, wife, and all responsibilities that he could possibly ignore.

Harry spent the next few hours thinking he may drive himself mad with worry. He could not leave the manor. He could not reach Voldemort through their connection, though he did try, relentlessly so. There was no response.

Harry was once more trapped at Malfoy Manor… alone.

Well, not entirely alone, although the addition of Narcissa Malfoy did little to help. Under other circumstances, Harry would have assuredly been delighted to have Narcissa here with him. However, it was not just Narcissa who arrived, but her team of wedding planners and now, *decorators*. She was in a frightening state. Rather than be concerned for Ron and Hermione's welfare, being asked to remain at the Ministry last minute—for she, like the rest of the magical community, assumed that nothing was *amiss*, even if it was all wildly surprising—Narcissa was incensed. They had a wedding to finish planning, and they couldn't very well rehearse things if the bride and groom weren't here, could they, and how was it that she had managed to lose Draco in the crowd before coming back home, and *where was Lucius?*

Harry could still hear her shouts of rage as she vented to the poor planners about being the only person who ever got things done as he escaped, making his way back to his room. He didn't particularly want to be by himself, but he much preferred that than being stuck with Narcissa and her victims.

And so it was with great resentment that Harry found himself, once more, in his room by himself. He closed the door. He locked it. He sat on the edge of his bed and stared at the clock, noting that it was a

little past 1 in the afternoon.

How long would he be left waiting this time?

Before he could settle into a state of anxious but resolved despair, a sharp *'pop!'* made Harry jump to his feet. “Mister Potter,” Binny said, giving a polite bow. “Would you be liking some lunch, sir?”

Harry exhaled a deep breath. “No," he said. "Thanks, though."

“Binny is being told that Mr. Potter is needing to eat, sir.”

“I’m not hungry. Really. But maybe later.”

Binny looked conflicted, but nodded. “Is there anything else Binny can be doing for you, sir?”

Within reason, Harry added in his mind. He smiled. “No. Thank you, Binny.” Binny bowed, but just before he could vanish Harry said, “Wait. Yes, there is.”

“Yes, sir?”

“When Hermione and Ron come back, the *moment* they arrive in the manor, will you let me know?”

Binny's brows furrowed and his ears drooped slightly. He looked like he was trying to decide if this was, somehow, a request which was out of line.

“I just want to know when they’re back,” Harry said, “so I don’t have to wait in the foyer all day for them. So… so I can rest here instead. I’m feeling a bit weary, is all, but I would feel much better about resting properly if I knew that you would let me know when they’re here again.”

That did the trick. The house-elf was under strict instructions to make sure Harry Potter was well, and if Harry needed the reassurance that he would inform him of his friends’ return to rest, he would give it to him.

“Of course, Mr. Potter.”

“You promise? You’ll wake me up, if I’m asleep?”

“Of course, sir,” Binny said, and Harry was surprised that he sounded a bit miffed. He was even more surprised at the glimmer of magic that

sparked to life at his emotion—another bright moment of otherwise quiet elf magic. “I is a *proper* house-elf, sir. I do all that I says I shall do and obey my masters perfectly at all times.”

The threat of a smile tugged at the corner of Harry’s lips. He could think of a few instances where a house-elf had not obeyed their masters perfectly at all times.

But then he remembered that both those house-elves were dead, murdered because they had come to his aid, and when Binny bowed and disapparated without further comment, Harry felt more alone than ever.

With little else to do—and with wanting to be convincing with the lie he had just given Binny—Harry did ultimately decide to lie down. He hadn’t expected to fall asleep. He had just been staring at the clock with fervor (how was it that the second hand seemed to slow down the longer he watched it?) when, at some moment that was indiscernible, he slipped from consciousness into slumber.

He dreamt of the woods.

Perhaps it was his longing for freedom manifesting, but there was something intensely satisfying about being outside. It was not the Forbidden Forest—Harry could tell that right away—but some other, friendlier sanctuary. The sun was shining to the west, setting, a dull, warm gold filtering in through the leaves and turning them a vibrant green. Harry rested one hand on an evergreen tree and inhaled, relishing the feeling of bark beneath his palms and the scent of pine. He leaned against the wide, sturdy trunk. He felt at peace.

Then there was the sound of a twig snapping, and everything went dark.

Harry’s hands flew to his face, fingers trembling as they traced over his features—he whipped his head around one way, eyes wide open, and then next—but no, it could not be—

He was blind again.

Panic gripped at Harry’s heart, suffocating in its intensity. He thought he heard another twig snapping, and his world—his dark, horrible world—suddenly became even darker. There was a toxic blackness in the air, and it was coming for him.

Find him, find him, find him…

Voices.

Harry turned and ran, his shoulder colliding harshly with the pine tree he had just been resting against. He stumbled but somehow retained his balance, only to nearly collide with another tree a moment later—he couldn't see, but he had to escape from that wave of blackness, from whatever was speaking, chasing him, hunting him—

"Mr. Potter?"

Harry sat bolt upright, his heart hammering. Binny squeaked and jumped back from his bed.

"I-Is you all right, sir?" the small elf asked. "You was twitching in your sleep…"

Harry took a deep breath, waiting until he felt a bit steadier to answer. What *had* he been dreaming about…? It had been so vivid a second before…

All he could remember was darkness.

"I'm fine," Harry said, repressing a shudder. "Sorry if I frightened you."

Harry glanced at the clock—almost 3 pm. He'd been asleep for a few hours. He swung his legs around the edge of the bed, then jumped to his feet. "Are they back?"

"Miss Granger is back, sir," Binny answered.

Harry frowned. "Only her?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay. Thank you, Binny."

The elf looked like he was about to say something else, but Harry was already marching down the hall, heading towards the foyer. Hermione was here, alone… and he wanted to get to her before Narcissa could.

Harry was descending the staircase towards the foyer soon enough, glad to note that Narcissa and her planners were not in the vicinity. He saw Hermione right away, standing near the center of the room, and was surprised to see that the fireplace was roaring with green

flames. As though someone else had just left, Harry realized.

“Who was that?”

Hermione jumped at the sound of Harry’s voice. “Harry! you scared me!”

Harry hurried over to her. “Who was that, leaving just now?”

“Just an escort,” Hermione said.

“What happened?” Harry’s eyes darted over her features. She did not look as though she had been harmed in any way, and her magic, while slightly frazzled from Harry’s sudden appearance, was as it usually was—deep reddish waves, surging slowly. “Where’s Ron?”

“Still at the Ministry. Doing something for Umbridge, though I'm not sure what…”

“But he’s all right?”

“Yes, he’s fine—”

“What happened right after the speech?” Harry pressed on. “Hermione, I can’t believe that you—”

Hermione made a hissing sound, looking over her shoulder. “Not out here,” she whispered sharply. “Let’s go to my room…”

Harry followed her without question. They entered her bedroom on the west wing, and Hermione locked the door with a wordless spell. Harry felt a surge of longing at the sight of her wand. *Soon,* he promised himself.

“He wasn’t thrilled,” Hermione began. “I obviously was… was more than a little insolent by saying all that—”

“It was *genius*.”

Harry grinned widely, and Hermione’s face and magic both turned rosy. “He can’t possibly eliminate the sorting now,” Harry went on. “And the taboo! You destroyed the taboo—and *valour?*” Harry laughed. “You might as well have said for Voldemort and Godric!”

Hermione smirked. “That wouldn’t have had as nice a ring to it,” she said slyly.

“But he hasn’t punished you, has he?” Harry said urgently, the smile falling from his face. “He hasn’t done anything to you?”

“Not… not really.”

Harry felt anger beginning to swell deep in his chest. Voldemort had sworn never to harm one of his friends again. “What does that mean? What did he do?”

“He, um… He sort of… promoted me.” Hermione swallowed hard and gave a small, nervous laugh. “I am now the Dark Lord’s personal assistant.”

Harry gawked at her. “Why on earth would he do that?” he asked. “And what the bloody hell does that even mean?”

“Well, I’m not entirely sure, as I haven’t really started yet,” Hermione said. “But I think it means that the Dark Lord will be giving me much more to do in order to keep me as busy as possible, and will be checking in on me frequently, wanting to know exactly where I am and what I am doing at all times.”

Ah, Harry thought.

Are you familiar with the phrase, ‘Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer?’

“He’s just putting a tighter leash on you,” he said darkly. *Because he can’t hurt you, and he can’t get rid of you,* he added in the privacy of his own thoughts.

Hermione nodded dismally. “It would appear so.”

Harry exhaled a low, deep breath. Voldemort’s *personal assistant*… It sounded like a job straight from hell. What could he do to save Hermione from this fate? He wouldn’t allow Voldemort to abuse her by forcing her to perform whatever horrible tasks he wanted, just to keep her brilliant mind occupied. That was just a different form of torture.

“I’m not worried,” Hermione said, as though Harry had said this out loud. She touched his shoulder comfortingly. “He won’t hurt me, Harry. He can’t. He’s turned me—and Ron, and you—into symbols, now. He needs us. We’re safe.”

Harry snorted. “Safe,” he muttered. “Right.”

Harry doubted he would ever feel as though he and his friends were safe, no matter what promises were made to him. Not in Voldemort's world.

"We are," Hermione said, sounding very much like she was trying to convince herself as well as Harry. "Trust me."

Harry stared into her brown eyes, thinking for a moment that they appeared darker than before. Her hair too, slicked back as it was, and she was paler than she ever had been. The slight changes reminded Harry horribly of a younger Tom Riddle—the version of himself before he had shredded his soul, causing his features to warp and his eyes to turn a vivid scarlet…

And then, all at once, Harry remembered. "We're alone," he said bluntly.

Hermione's magic whirled and her soothing smile vanished. Harry could tell she knew exactly what he was going to bring up. "We… we are," she said.

"You know what I am."

There was a tense silence. Hermione's gaze fell to the floor. "Yes," she eventually said. "Yes, I do."

"How long?"

Harry already knew the answer, as Voldemort had told him, but he wanted to hear it from her. "I think… I suspected it for a few months, but… but I didn't know until I heard you on the radio… Oh, Harry, I…"

She looked on the verge of tears. Hermione flung herself at him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

Harry, startled, hugged her back, but was pushing her away a moment later. "Hermione," he said seriously. "You know—"

"I've been looking into it," she interrupted. "Researching it as much as I can, you know, but there's not really any material out there on human horcruxes; I doubt there has ever been one before you. But there has to be a way to rectify this, to do *something*, and it's really a shame that Nagini is dead, because she could have been a great vehicle for research, but she was beheaded with a sword *with* basilisk venom, so—"

Her voice had gotten higher and higher as she talked, quickly, but she abruptly stopped. "*What?*" Harry asked, shocked. "She was beheaded with what?"

"Gryffindor's sword," Hermione answered. "…Neville killed her. He killed her with Gryffindor's sword."

A long moment of silence as Harry tried to envision this. Neville Longbottom had not only killed Nagini, he had truly and completely destroyed the horcrux within her… with the sword of Godric Gryffindor.

And now he was dead. Did Hermione know? She must have, based on how her magic dulled. Ron must have told her…

Harry felt light-headed. He sat on the edge of Hermione's bed, where she sat next to him, burying her head into his shoulder and sniffling. Harry wiped a tear from his own eye as well, but he was too overwhelmed to cry just then.

"I'm a horcrux too, Hermione," he said flatly. It felt surreal to say the words out loud, like he was speaking a foreign language. He tried again. "I'm a horcrux."

Hermione didn't say anything this time, just put her arms around his shoulders in a sideways hug, pulling him closer. The silence stretched on for a long time.

"You know what has to happen," Harry eventually said, surprised at how steady his voice was. "Hermione, I—"

"Don't you dare finish that sentence, Harry James Potter!" Hermione snapped. She jumped to her feet, rounding on him, and Harry stood too, shocked at the rapid switch in her demeanor. Her magic crackled about her, dark, crimson waves roiling as she whipped out her wand. "Don't even think about it, or I will hex you into next Tuesday!"

"All right, all right!" Harry said, backing up. "All right, I won't—just, just please don't hex me into next Tuesday. I'd miss your wedding."

Hermione blinked once, looking dazed. "Oh, God," she said, slowly lowering her wand. "The *wedding*. I—"

As if it had been planned, a sudden *pop* interrupted her. Binny appeared before them, bowing. "Mr. Weasley has returned, sir," the elf said, addressing Harry. "And—"

“I brought the ickle groom to be!”

Harry nearly blanched at the sickly sweet, sing-song voice that sounded outside Hermione’s door, echoing in the foyer. Ron had returned, and it seemed he had been escorted by Bellatrix Lestrange.

The reaction was immediate. There was the sound of many footsteps charging down the hall—Narcissa’s entourage, surely—as well as Narcissa herself. “Finally! Where is Hermione? And Harry? And my worthless family? We have so much to do! We have to rehearse! We have to finish decorating! *Final preparations!”*

If Ron mumbled a response, Harry couldn’t make it out. He shot Hermione a dark look.

“Oh dear,” said Hermione. “I… I suppose we’d better—”

“Yeah,” Harry muttered. “Yeah, I know.”

He had so much more he wanted to talk to her about, but there was no chance of having a long-winded discussion about his fate of being a human horcrux. Not now.

Still, he felt as though some of the weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Hermione knew what he was, really and truly, and she *was* clearly very adamant about him not dying. Even though Voldemort had already told him this, it was nice to hear it firsthand—even if it had been in a more threatening way that Harry would have imagined.

Harry opened the door for her. Hermione straightened her posture and put on a bright, smiling face. “Shall we?” she asked.

“After you,” Harry said, smiling back at her—a painful and forced grin. It hurt after just a few seconds, his cheery mask, and he wondered just how the hell they all were going to make it through this weekend.

The wedding was tomorrow.

The Wedding

Harry adjusted the collar of his robes, his palms sweating and fingers slightly shaky. *This,* he thought, anxious, *is the worst part. It's always the worst part.*

The *waiting.*

Harry was standing outside of the room where, in just a few minutes, his two best friends would be bound for life. Right now, on the other side of the currently closed, oak door, Lord Voldemort was enchanting a blade that would slice both Ron's and Hermione's palms so that they could be bound by blood magic.

Harry, a witness, would be invited inside when it was time. He checked his watch. What he was currently anxious for was something else.

Some*one* else.

A slight *pop* caused Harry to jump, even though he had been waiting for it. He turned on the spot, emotions bubbling in his chest.

"Harry!"

Harry smiled. "Mrs. Weasley."

Binny barely stepped out of the way in time. Molly Weasley barreled towards Harry with unprecedented swiftness, pulling him into a hug. The feeling of her arms around him was crushing in their strength, despite how thin and frail she appeared.

She made a very unflattering sound that reminded Harry of the banshee in the Weasley attic. As Mrs. Weasley buried her head into his chest, Harry found himself smiling wider than ever. Molly's magic was everything he thought it might have been—a fiery red-orange, not unlike her son's, though much brighter and warmer—and it was currently buzzing with emotion. Harry felt like he was wrapped in a heatwave.

"Oh, oh, oh," Mrs. Weasley sobbed, her hold on Harry not lessening even slightly. She swayed back and forth, keeping him trapped in her arms. "Oh, how I—how we've—OH—!"

She let out another guttural wail. "Mrs. Weasley," Harry said, trying to

soothe her. He glanced at the closed oak door. While he figured Voldemort would have enchanted the space to be soundproof, he was not *entirely* sure. "It's all right. Breathe, please."

Mrs. Weasley sniffled loudly, finally loosening her grip. She stared into Harry's face, her eyes brimming with tears. Harry could truly see the effect the war was having on her, then. Her complexion was sallow, and there were deep frown lines between her eyes that had not been there before. Her expression was conflicting. She looked relieved to see Harry alive and well, and yet the sadness on her face was unmissable.

To her credit, she didn't flinch at Harry's new and unsettling red irises.

Harry had so many, many things he wanted to ask—and he was sure Mrs. Weasley did, too—but there was no time. A few short seconds later and the oak doors swung open. Harry and Mrs. Weasley looked towards them as one, knowing they were meant to enter.

"We will get through this, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said, her voice soft but firm. "We will."

Harry knew she was speaking about much more than the wedding. He nodded. Mrs. Weasley gripped his forearm tightly, and together they entered the ceremonial room.

The room was small, dark, and largely unadorned, yet Harry found himself in awe the moment he walked in. No decorations were lining the walls; no lace, flowers, nor any of the other garish garlands that currently covered the of the rest of Malfoy Manor… but they were unneeded.

The *magic*.

Even if he were not able to sense magic so aptly, Harry was certain that he would have felt it. Knew it, in fact, because judging by the way Mrs. Weasley gasped, he could tell that she felt it, too. Magic—thick, warm, and undulating—filled the air.

Hermione and Ron stood facing one another at the end of the room. Though they glanced at Harry and Mrs. Weasley when they entered, their attention returned almost at once to each other. Harry was amazed by the way their auras were interacting—Hermione's deep red waves and Ron's bright, cheery orange. They frothed around each other, never quite touching but darting back and forth towards each

other closely. It was like a playful, enchanting dance.

Then there was Voldemort's aura. His black magic was much calmer in comparison, dark and lustrous between the two active energies of Hermione and Ron. Harry stared at him, but Voldemort was not looking at anyone in the room. His focus was fixed downwards, where he held in his hands a small blade.

The knife, which was made of polished silver, exuded an energy all its own. It was not exactly a friendly magic, Harry thought, but not what he would consider dark, either. Just a neutral sheen in the midst of all the other energy in the room. A power waiting to be used.

Voldemort lifted the knife. Mrs. Weasley stiffened next to Harry, drawing in a sharp breath, but Harry was too spell-bound to look at her.

Voldemort turned the blade over, offering it with the handle out towards Hermione. Astoundingly, Hermione accepted the knife without even looking at him. It was like her attention was stuck on Ron—an action that was mutual, given the mesmerized look he was currently fixing Hermione with. Perhaps it was all a part of this ritual, Harry mused. Their magic was absorbed in one another's, and Harry got the feeling that they couldn't care less who else was in the room right now. Their attention was all for each other.

Hermione raised the blade, and Ron, unwaveringly, offered her his left hand. She did not hesitate to make a thin, light incision on his palm, and Ron didn't flinch as the blood blossomed there. Mrs. Weasley took in another sharp breath, one hand flying to her mouth, but again, Harry could not look away from what was happening.

Hermione handed the blade to Ron, who then repeated the same slicing action across her left palm. Harry expected him to hesitate, but he didn't, moving almost as though he was in a trance while making the very small, precise cut into her skin. Blood bloomed from the line in her palm in the same place as his.

Voldemort took the knife back from Ron, his face a mask of emotionlessness, but his magic stirred as though pleased. Ron didn't look at him. He and Hermione's gazes were locked, and at the same time, they smiled.

They each lifted their bleeding hands in perfect synchrony. *"Habes cor meum et animam meam,"* they said in unison, and Harry was thrilled to hear that Ron pronounced everything perfectly.

Then they pressed their bloody palms together.

Wow, was all Harry could think at that moment. Their auras, which had been teasingly dancing around each other before, suddenly collided. They melded together in a most beatific and glorious fashion. Burgundy waves and bright, frothy orange—two colors which Harry would have thought would clash terribly, if he were being honest—came together in a shockingly beautiful manner. They swirled and bled into one another, and it was difficult to tell where one began and the other ended.

Harry wondered what that felt like, to be so intimately bound with someone. It must have been lovely, judging by the way the two beamed at one another, their eyes shining. Then, as though it was unthinkable not to, they each stepped forward and shared what Harry could easily say was the most romantic kiss he had ever witnessed in his life. Their magic swirled and brightened as their lips touched. Mrs. Weasley let out a high, emotion-filled sound.

Voldemort waited, his face still unreadable until the two finally stopped. Even when they did, they kept their hands held together, the blood dripping onto the floor between their clasped fingers. "Your hands," the Dark Lord said quietly.

They both snapped their heads in his direction, like they had forgotten that Lord Voldemort was in the room with them. Hermione cleared her throat loudly and lifted her hand, and Ron, his face turning scarlet, did the same. Voldemort set the enchanted blade aside and pulled out his wand.

Instantly, Harry bristled—the sight of the Deathstick in the Dark Lord's hands enough to bring him crashing back to reality. The high of the magical display of his best friend's union dissipated in a flash.

His wariness, however, was for naught. All Voldemort did was cast a simple healing charm. The cuts on Hermione's and Ron's hands sealed shut, leaving nothing but a thin, light red scar behind. He vanished the blood next, which Harry now saw had gotten onto Ron's robes and Hermione's dress.

It was only then that Harry noticed what it was they were wearing. Their magic had been so distracting—and the room so dim, besides—that he hadn't even registered Ron's slick dress robes and, far more impressively, Hermione's stunning gown of silk and lace.

Voldemort put his wand away and stepped back, leading them

towards the door on the other side of the room. Harry swallowed hard. He knew what waited on the other side of that door. It led to the top of a grand stairwell; to the ballroom where, at this very moment, hundreds of witches and wizards were waiting to greet the newly married couple.

Voldemort's gaze settled on each of them in turn: first Ron and Hermione, the latter of which nodded as though to say that she was ready, then to Mrs. Weasley. Harry felt a rush of pride when, upon being met with the stare of Lord Voldemort, Mrs. Weasley did not look away. She straightened her posture, tightening her grip on Harry's forearm as her magic bolstered with resolve.

Voldemort didn't react to her, only shifted his attention onto Harry for the first time since he'd entered the ceremonial room. His aura glistened with something Harry couldn't quite name. When his lips twitched, Harry was unsure if they were threatening to turn into a scowl or a smile. Harry stood tall and waited, trying not to let the nervousness he was feeling show on his face.

"Let us go," Voldemort finally said. He turned away from them and, without a wand or a word, caused the door leading out to the ballroom to open before them.

The sound was deafening.

Lord Voldemort’s appearance into the foyer was met with raucous applause. He accepted it graciously, arms wide and smiling for cameras that flashed from either side. He did not linger at the forefront of the balcony long; he quickly moved aside and motioned towards Hermione and Ron. The two shared an apprehensive look before stepping forward. Hermione was every bit the blushing bride as she and Ron held hands, raising them in unison. The applause that action garnered was, somehow, even louder.

And the *magic*. Harry was light-headed as he took it all in from behind where Hermione and Ron made their reception. Were it not for the strength of Molly Weasley’s grip on his forearm, he thought he might have swayed.

It *assaulted* him, the brilliance of it all. Magical auras that were as plentiful as they had been when he’d entered the Ministry for his trial, but they were much more vibrant now. All of them. Hermione’s and Ron’s coiling energies; Molly’s shaking red exudence; Voldemort’s sky of glittering darkness. The stretch of auras below them were too

numerous and clustered to yet differentiate, but together they were like a sea of lava. Too bright, too exuberant, too *much*.

“Harry?” Mrs. Weasley squeezed his arm tighter. “Are you all right?”

Harry blinked and shook his head. “Yes,” he said, willing the powerful waves of magic to recede. He had learned from his time in the Ministry that if he did not focus on them so much, they did not overwhelm him. “Yes, I’m fine.”

She returned his smile. “Let’s do this, then.”

Harry hadn’t noticed that Hermione and Ron were making their way down the grandiose staircase, entering the party. Voldemort, having gone ahead of them, was already on the ground floor. Lucius and Narcissa greeted him with subservient bows and bright smiles. They acted flawlessly; it was as though this was the first time Lord Voldemort had deigned them with his presence in their home.

Startled, Harry realized the odd situation they were in. Because he had lingered, star-struck by the all-encompassing magic, he and Mrs. Weasley were now alone on the balcony. And just as Harry recognized this, the crowd’s attention began drifting away from the newly married couple… and onto them.

The shift in the atmosphere happened quickly. While it was expected that they all cheer for their Lord and for Hermione and Ron, it was obviously *not* so clear how they were meant to react to this: Harry Potter, recently declared free man and previous mortal enemy to Lord Voldemort, linking arms with Molly Weasley—the mother of the groom, the other witness. The witch whose household he, Harry, had been denied staying in while he was ‘rehabilitated’.

The applause spluttered out and the cameras stopped flashing. Harry swallowed thickly, frozen to the spot as people began to cast wary glances and mutter to one another. He didn’t look at any one person directly. Their auras were so conflicting—some felt joyous, others filled with ire; most in a state of confusion or curiosity. Voldemort’s, whom Harry could always sense quite keenly, was a glistening sheet of impatience.

At that moment, the music began to play. It effectively broke the tension and snapped Harry out of his stupor. From a stage at the far back of the foyer, an entire orchestra filled the room with a rich, classical song.

“Come along, dear,” Mrs. Weasley said softly. She turned a cheery and convincing smile towards the crowd before tugging gently on his arm, taking Harry with her down the stairs.

By the time they made it there, Hermione and Ron were already being bombarded. Witches and wizards that Harry recognized vaguely as members of the Wizengamot were shaking their hands, congratulating them on their nuptials.

Voldemort too was swept up in this throng of elite, eager-to-please people. He greeted them all with charming smiles and perfect politeness, but Harry could see what a lie it was. Voldemort’s magic was darkening by the moment.

Before Harry could consider why this was the case—wasn’t everything going exactly as he’d planned?—a familiar, navy aura distracted him.

“Harry,” Narcissa said, touching him on the shoulder. She’d slipped away from the small crowd encircling Hermione and Ron to greet him. “Don’t you look handsome this evening.”

“Narcissa,” Harry said, returning her smile. He hesitated, thinking of the appropriate thing to say. “Your dress looks lovely,” he settled for.

“Oh, this old thing?” Narcissa smirked as she gestured down towards an emerald green gown that was nothing short of lavish. “Not my finest dress robes, a bit more modern than I prefer, but I’m glad you like them… Now this, *this* is very traditional.”

She motioned towards Mrs. Weasley’s dress—a pale blue set of robes that was much simpler compared to Narcissa’s—and her eyes narrowed. “Hello Molly,” she said, and though her smile stayed fixed in place, her magic writhed.

“Narcissa,” Molly said stiffly. Her hold on Harry’s arm tightened to painful and her aura bristled with resentment. But she also smiled. “You’ve done a beautiful job with the wedding decorations.”

“Thank you. It somehow managed to come together, despite the incompetence of what is supposedly London’s best team of planners, designers, and decorators. Though I imagine you wouldn’t know what dealing with all that is like.”

“No,” Molly said through clenched teeth. “I tend to organize things myself. I prefer not to deal with incompetence.”

“Yes, I’m sure that’s why,” Narcissa sneered. “Well, I suppose it was a good thing I *did* hire outside help—it gave me more time to make sure everyone had proper attire for their big day. Like Harry, here.”

Narcissa’s smile became far more genuine as she looked at Harry, smoothing the collar of the shirt beneath his robes fondly.

Molly’s magic bristled even further. “As though I wouldn’t have been capable of that,” she seethed. “In fact, I picked out Harry’s first set of dress robes ever. For the Yule Ball. Because I’ve *always* been like a mother to Harry, I’ve *always* welcomed him into my home… and not because some court order demanded that I do it.”

Oh, no, Harry thought as he felt the way the two women’s auras writhed with mutual loathing. He could only be grateful that, at the very least, no one seemed to be paying attention as they hissed dangerous words to one another. Everyone in the vicinity was preoccupied by the newly married couple or Lord Voldemort.

Narcissa’s eyes flashed dangerously at Molly’s accusation. Harry decided it would be best to intervene, though what he should say, he was unsure. “Narcissa,” he started, keeping his voice low so as not to draw attention to them. “Please. Mrs. Weasley is upset, and rightfully so, that I didn’t get to stay with them again. She’s right. She’s always been like a mother to me. I owe her more than I can ever repay for that… But.”

He turned his attention to Mrs. Weasley. “Narcissa has been wonderful to me, too. Despite all our past differences, she’s been… a life saver. Truly. I would have been lost this past month without her. Please, don’t fault her for what happened at the Ministry. It was in no way her decision… He was never going to let me go anywhere else.”

Molly’s face contorted with a flurry of emotions, most prominently confusion. “This… a month?” she said, her voice barely a whisper.

Too late did Harry realize what he’d said. As far as the rest of the world knew, he had only been at Malfoy Manor for a little over a week. *Potterwatch* had been declaring that he, Harry, was still on the run before that.

Silence fell between the three of them. Harry, unable to take back his lie, nodded shortly. Mrs. Weasley looked stricken, her eyes going back and forth between Harry and Narcissa as she pieced it together. Narcissa raised her chin haughtily, a small but pertinent action, confirming Molly’s suspicions without so much as a nod.

“Please don’t hate each other,” Harry pleaded. “At least… not for the rest of the night, anyway.”

The two witches held each other’s gazes for a long moment. Harry waited, curious to see if either would concede—and if so, who would do so first. Narcissa may have been outwardly more imposing, but Harry could feel the ferocity of Molly Weasley’s magic stirring.

“Champagne?”

The hostile staring contest was interrupted as a young wizard in uniform appeared, offering those near him flutes of bubbling champagne. He smiled happily at Molly and Narcissa, then nearly dropped his tray when his eyes flickered to Harry’s. Harry pretended not to notice.

From behind where Narcissa stood, Ron turned. He must have heard the wizard’s offer of alcohol, for he quickly slipped out of the conversation with some Wizengamot members he was in. “I’ll take one of those,” he said, grabbing a glass. “Mum!”

Mrs. Weasley beamed at her youngest son. “Oh, Ronald!” she shouted, embracing him tightly. Ron barely held on to his recently acquired champagne. “Your married! My baby boy is *married*!”

Now that she finally had Ron’s attention, Mrs. Weasley seemed content to ignore Narcissa—a sentiment which Narcissa appeared to share. “Excuse me,” she said, looking to Harry. “I should find my husband… if you need anything at all, Harry, you let me know.”

“I’m great, Narcissa,” Harry said. “Everything is perfect. *You* made everything perfect. Thank you.”

It was the right thing to say. All of Narcissa’s earlier frostiness melted on the spot. She touched smiled before stepping away, off to find Lucius and attend to her many guests.

“Mum—mum, please, I can’t breathe—”

Harry laughed as Mrs. Weasley reluctantly released her son. Her eyes were shining and Ron was bright red, but they were both grinning. Realizing that people were watching them, Ron cleared his throat. “I’m a married man now, mother,” he said in tones of forced dignity. “You should treat me with a little more respect.”

“Not a chance, Ronnie-kins.”

Harry's smile widened as Fred and George, seemingly from nowhere, appeared on either side of Ron. Fred grinned maliciously, an expression which was mirrored on George. "You'll always be the baby boy!"

George leaned forward as he said it, pinching Ron's cheek. Ron batted him away, but Harry's breath suddenly caught in his throat. As he'd turned his head, George had revealed the wound where his ear used to be. A dark, sinister hole.

He nearly died, Harry recalled with a startling rush. *If that curse had been just an inch to the left…*

But then Fred and George both were hugging their youngest brother from either side, and everyone was smiling and laughing, and Harry had to smile and laugh, too. "And look who it is!" George shouted exuberantly. He gestured wildly towards Harry. "The *Undesirable*!"

Harry wasn't sure how to react to being called such a thing so loudly, given the circumstances. He didn't see Voldemort in the vicinity any longer—perhaps a blessing, if also a cause for concern. A few people who *were* nearby gasped, and Mrs. Weasley gave them an angry look. Ron paled and disappeared in the crowd with a single backwards step. The twins, however, ignored it all. They both grabbed Harry's shoulders and shook his hand as though this were a perfectly normal wedding on a perfectly normal day.

It felt surreal to think that they last time he had seen them, Fred and George had been gagged, bound, and kicked off their own radio show. Permanently.

"Looking sharp, Harry," said Fred, gesturing towards his robes.

"A few changes in appearance I'm not so fond of," said George, staring at Harry's eyes. "But who am I to talk—I'm walking around with a damn hole in my head."

"You pull it off fabulously," said Harry.

"I like to think so. But it does make earmuffs a bit of conundrum for me."

"I've always thought you look terrible in earmuffs," said Fred. "Sadly, brother, you don't have the face for it."

"I've the same face as you!"

“Mine’s marginally comelier, I’m afraid—”

“Stop it you two,” Mrs. Weasley snapped, interrupting them. “If either of you do anything stupid this evening I swear to high heaven—”

“Mum, we’d *never*…”

“Honestly, mother, you know we wouldn’t *dream* of doing anything stupid…”

Harry decided to use that moment of distraction to retreat from Mrs. Weasley and the twins. As Fred and George reassured her that there would be no tomfoolery on such a special day—a promise which Harry had a foreboding feeling would not be kept—he slipped into the crowd.

It was Ron and Hermione he looked for, wanting to properly congratulate them, but the couple had vanished. He didn’t see Voldemort, either—not that he wanted to spend the evening with him, certainly, but an individual Harry thought was worth keeping track of. Especially considering the gloomy state his magic had been deteriorating into.

The Dark Lord in a bad mood never ended well.

Harry’s head spun as he searched through the crowds, trying not to get too caught up in the copious amounts of magic. While most people tended to move away from him when they saw who it was—a reaction Harry was used to and not surprised by—he nearly ran into three waiters with arms full of glasses of wine. Annoyed, Harry pushed past them and their trays. Where were Ron and Hermione? Where was Voldemort? Where had they gone so quickly?

He only had to wait a moment to find out. As though in response to his fear, a light and musical note rung throughout the hall. It caused the music to come to halt. Everyone turned to see Lord Voldemort on the stage where the band had been playing a moment before. He held a glass of wine in one hand and his wand in the other. Standing before him, directly in front of the stage, were Hermione and Ron.

Voldemort pointed his wand at his throat. When he spoke, his voice reverberated clearly in the hall for all to hear.

“What a joyous occasion this is,” he said, smiling in what appeared to be a sincere manner at the bride and groom. Still, his magic was deep and dark with discontent. Harry couldn’t fathom why. “It is with great

pleasure that I recognize the union between a pureblooded, reformed wizard and a muggle-born witch… one who has been properly registered and welcomed, with warmth, into our magical community…"

He raised his glass. "To Ronald and Hermione Weasley," toasted Lord Voldemort. Cameras flashed with brilliance from every direction; people cheered their approval.

The reasoning for the surplus of waiters suddenly made sense. Everyone but he, Harry, had a glass in their hand by now. Not wanting to look stupid—and worse, to be caught on camera while looking so—Harry turned and snatched one off a nearby tray just in time to raise his glass along with everyone else.

He was not prepared for the taste of the champagne when it hit his tongue. It was surprisingly sweet. *Bubbly*. The smile that followed drinking it was practically involuntary.

"And now," Voldemort continued, "we celebrate in the most traditional way we know how… with dance."

The band took the cue at once. Another song began, this one slow and romantic. Ron and Hermione turned to one another—both blushing, both smiling shyly. Ron looked like the happiest man in the world as he extended his hand towards Hermione. She accepted it, and a moment later they were whirling together, a lone couple in the center of the dance floor.

Everyone watched as they shared their first dance. While Harry saw fond stares coming from every direction—the love Ron and Hermione shared was obvious to all—he almost pitied them for being unable to perceive what he could. Ron's bright magic against Hermione's deep aura while they danced was almost as mesmerizing as when they'd gotten married. Their magic twisted and swirled radiantly; it was as though every part of them was lost in dance, song, and each other.

It was beautiful. It was moving. It was deeply, deeply romantic.

The only thing powerful enough to distract Harry from it was Voldemort.

The Dark Lord was leaving the stage… and, so it seemed, the hall. His exit was swift, quiet—probably imperceptible to anyone but Harry. But Harry *did* notice it, because the Dark Lord's aura was as dark and gravitational as a black hole. Its unnerved energy was enough to have

Harry's full attention—and fear.

Why was Voldemort so unhappy?

Harry wasn't about to wait to find out. While everyone else watched the newly-weds dance, he carefully slid through the crowd, deftly abandoning his wine on a waiter's tray.

He followed the Dark Lord's hostility to the other side of the foyer's double doors, just as he turned into a hallway. Harry got the feeling he was on the precipice of disapparating when he caught up to him.

"Where are you going?"

Voldemort's sickly magic twitched in surprise at Harry's voice, but when he turned to face him, he looked unphased. "Harry," he said shortly. "You should be enjoying the festivities."

"So should you," Harry snapped back. "And yet here you are, abandoning your own carefully constructed political event… So. Where are you going?"

Voldemort's aura darkened with a much more familiar emotion—annoyance. "It is hardly your right to ask where I intend to go at any point," he said. "I have far more pressing things to deal with than the frivolous after-effects of a wedding. The union is done. That is all that matters to me."

"Okay then," Harry said. He crossed his arms, suspicious. "*Why* are you leaving?"

"Sad to see me go?" The slightest glimmer re-emerged in his magic. "Were you hoping to dance with *me*, Harry?"

Harry face flashed with heat, and for a moment he was at a loss. Voldemort laughed.

"I—you—I cannot think of a-anything more preposterous," he stuttered—and he meant it. Nothing would be more bewildering to the general public than seeing Lord Voldemort dancing with Harry Potter at his best friend's forced wedding.

"Agreed," said Voldemort. He then advanced, making Harry's muscles tense as he closed the gap between them. "Lord Voldemort does not *dance*."

“I guess not,” Harry said. He glanced down the hall where applause broke out—evidently, Hermione and Ron had just completed their first dance as a married couple. “You literally run away from the idea of it… but why?”

Why, when this whole event was your idea? Harry thought, but didn’t add.

Voldemort followed his gaze towards where the music began again—a much livelier tune this time. His magic darkened and writhed in that same way it had earlier. Not with anger, no, but with something else…

It’s revulsion, Harry realized. *Not full-blown hatred, but utter disgust.*

He *looked* disgusted, too. The expression on Lord Voldemort’s face was almost comical in how disturbed he looked—it appeared as though he might be sick.

Then it clicked.

It wasn’t the dancing itself that bothered him, and it wasn’t that he had far more pressing things to tend to… It was that he couldn’t stand to be there any longer. There was so much love in that room—between Ron and Hermione, between family members, between friends—that Voldemort literally, physically, could not deal with it.

He couldn’t deal with all the *love* in the air.

The realization almost made Harry laugh out loud, but he managed to hold it in.

“My whereabouts—and why I am leaving—are not your concern,” Voldemort said.

Harry was still skeptical. “You’re really leaving… You’re leaving me. Here. With my friends… without you.”

It *did* seem too good to be true.

Voldemort, however, only smiled. “Of course,” he said. “You are a *free man,* after all…”

He grabbed Harry by the chin, tightly. “And I have *plenty* of eyes on you here.”

Harry glared at him as Voldemort smiled wider. He knew he was

right. This wedding was crawling with far more Ministry workers, supporters, and Death Eaters than it was former Order members.

Harry held his gaze for a moment, then wrenched his jaw from Voldemort's hand. The Dark Lord laughed, allowing him to retreat. "Best be off then," Harry said. He turned and began to walk back towards the festivities. "Wouldn't want to be late for your far more pressing things. Oh, and—"

But when Harry turned to fire one last jab to his face, it was to see that the Dark Lord had already vanished.

Prick, Harry thought sourly.

Yet as he made his way towards the hall, Harry's spirits soared. He was going back to the wedding reception of his two best mates. While there were certainly many people he detested in attendance, there were also many of his real friends, alive and well. There was food and wine and dancing and people he really, truly cared for.

People he hadn't seen in a very long time.

With Lord Voldemort gone, he might, for the first time in ages… have fun.

Smiling more broadly than he thought possible, Harry followed the music and rejoined the party.

Dances and Details

When Harry returned to the ballroom, it was to see that things had progressed. The space had expanded to accommodate what was now many more couples dancing. Somehow—some form of architectural magic, no doubt, that was too complex for Harry to understand—an entire wall of the foyer had vanished. In its place was a massive archway covered in white and gold roses. The dance floor extended out into the yard of Malfoy manor, where Harry could see sparse woods and fairy lights twinkling in the distance.

For the first time, Harry wondered just how large the grounds were around the manor. Was the rose garden right outside, or was it further away? How deep were the woods that surrounded the huge, freshly cut lawns where white peacocks usually roamed?

How far away was the menacing iron gate that had once roared at him, Hermione, and Ron when they'd been kidnapped? Dragged here by Fenrir Greyback and thinking all was lost?

Harry's hand acted on its own accord, reaching instinctually into his inner pocket for his wand. Of course, he did not have one. Instead, they found the silky fabric of his Invisibility Cloak. Harry had it tucked away—always on him, as Voldemort had allowed and practically commanded—and though he could not use it to fight, it did give him some small comfort. Harry took a deep breath as he stroked it, allowing its smooth, familiar texture to soothe him.

Tonight was going to be a *good* night for once. Harry plastered a smile on his face and grabbed another glass of champagne, looking for Hermione and Ron as he entered. He still hadn't gotten the chance to talk to them together as a newly-wed couple.

It didn't take long for Harry's forced cheer to sour. Moving through the throng gave him yet another nasty flashback to his time as a fifth-year. People stared at him when he was near, edging away as though he might contaminate them. Some murmured behind their hands, some turned away, some openly ogled. Harry might have thought they all despised him were it not for their auras, which shimmered with something else. It wasn't as strong as the emotions he'd garnered from those he and Narcissa had passed by in Diagon Alley. It wasn't fear, no, but something like it. Not as harsh.

They're wary, Harry realized. They were hesitant and a little perplexed

by him. Harry couldn't exactly blame them. Were he in their place, he probably wouldn't know what to make of him, either. At least he was a guest of honor here. No one was *that* caught off guard by his presence.

Finally, after pushing his way through an uncomfortable crowd, Harry caught sight of Hermione and Ron. There was a jolting moment where he felt shaken—Hermione had raised her arm to touch Ron's shoulder, and the Dark Mark stood out like a black stain above her white dress—but his face broke out into a grin a moment later. She and Ron were talking with people he recognized. Seamus Finnegan, the Patil twins, and, to Harry's shock, Dean Thomas were there.

Dean Thomas! Their fellow Gryffindor who had also been captured by Snatchers, on the run from the Muggle-born Registration Committee…

Had he turned himself in, then? Had he registered? He must have, if he were here now… Harry pushed forward, eager to ask, when a hand on his shoulder caused him to stop.

"Why, it's ickle baby Harry Potter… and he's looking all grown up!"

Of all the people to confront him first, did it have to be *her*?

Harry clenched his teeth. Against his better judgment—and seeing no way to simply ignore her, as her nails were currently digging into his shoulder—Harry turned to face Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Hello, Bellatrix," Harry said, speaking in such a pleasant tone that she surely knew it was sarcastic. "Lovely to see you."

Bellatrix's velvety magic twisted in amusement. Harry's brows rose at the sight of her. He kept forgetting about her frightening new arm, an appendage which radiated a dark magic and shone like polished gunmetal. In her dress he could see that it connected seamlessly at her shoulder, making Harry appreciate for a moment Hermione's marksmanship. Just a few inches over, and she'd have cut Bellatrix Lestrange straight in half.

Sadly, she was quite whole now. The gown she wore was low-cut and had a slit up one side, exposing one of her legs an almost indecent amount.

Harry might have rolled his eyes at her attire. Leave it to Bellatrix Lestrange to wear *black* to a wedding.

“Don’t you look just dapper this evening,” she crooned. She released his shoulder to smooth the front of his dress robes, making Harry’s stomach churn. “Cissy always did have an excellent fashion sense.”

“Better than yours,” Harry said, still smiling. Her eyes narrowed as she dropped her hand. Harry took a sip of champagne.

“Not a fan of my new dress?”

“It’s a bit dark for my tastes.”

“I think your taste for dark things will change quite soon, ickle Harry… considering.”

Bellatrix smirked when Harry glowered at her, swirling her glass of wine. Nearby, Hermione let out an especially loud peel of laughter. Harry and Bellatrix both turned to look.

“I’m surprised you’re not with your little friends,” Bellatrix drawled. Though she kept her expression neutral, there was a glint in her eyes as she looked at Hermione that Harry did not like at all. Her magic writhed in a convoluted way.

It didn’t take much for Harry to guess what *that* meant. “Don’t you dare,” he said in a low, threatening voice. “Hermione is under the Dark Lord’s protection. You leave her alone.”

Bellatrix blinked at him, looking mildly surprised before she smirked again. “It’s cute that you think I would consider disobeying my master for any reason,” she said. “But I’m afraid I take orders from him, Harry, not you. I won’t be leaving dear Hermione alone much at all in the coming weeks, I’m afraid.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve been instructed by our Lord to give her Occlumency lessons.”

Harry’s heart sunk, suddenly and terribly. “Wh… what?”

“Oh, yes… The Dark Lord has deemed it imperative that little miss mudblood should be proficient in Occlumency as soon as possible, and has delegated the task to me. I’ve already taught Draco. I’m an excellent instructor.”

“But… but… Why?”

Just as he had asked, the answer came to him. *Hermione knew.* She

knew that Harry was horcrux, and Voldemort was aware that she knew, too—it was the only reason he had let her live. Because she knew what Harry was and wanted to protect him, anyway. And that, certainly, was a secret she was going to need to keep.Of course she had to learn Occlumency.

But did it have to be *Bellatrix Lestrange* that taught her?

Bellatrix shrugged nonchalantly at his question. “I don’t question my Lord’s commands, I only obey. I imagine it's because he has made her his assistant and wants to be sure that she can protect whatever information he confides in her…”

She aimed a predatory look at Hermione. “Whatever the case may be, I’m looking forward to spending some quality time with our newest Death Eater. To really making her feel like part of the family.”

“*How* do you not absolutely despise her?” Harry asked, nodding towards her arm. “Or were you being fictitious just now?”

“Fictitious? *Me?* Not at all,” Bellatrix said. She laughed. Harry would have preferred her metal nails dragging against a chalkboard to the sound. “I don’t absolutely despise her… She throws a good hex. I could have thrown it back at her if I wasn’t busy holding her now-husband down. And really, how could I possibly hate someone for fighting for *love*?”

Bellatrix laughed again, much more loudly. Several people nearby turned and looked towards her and Harry uneasily.

“You’re mad,” Harry muttered.

“Don't confuse madness for enthusiasm. Now, enjoy the party, Harry-kins.” She clinked her glass to his, though Harry did not bother to raise his own. “But don’t enjoy it too much. Remember… we’re *watching* you.”

She winked as she pointed up towards a floating camera. “Smile!”

Before Harry could think to do so, the camera flashed, momentarily blinding him. *Great,* he thought bitterly. That picture would certainly be one for the scrapbooks. By the time the sheen of light had faded from his eyes and Harry could properly see again, Bellatrix was gone.

“Harry!”

To his great relief, it was Ron who had called his name. “Ron. Thank Merlin.”

“I thought that I saw Bellatrix Lestrange cornering you,” he said. He looked around in confusion. “Did I? Or was I imagining that?”

“Nah. That was just some other evil witch wearing all black with a metal arm.”

“Blimey, what did she want?”

“Nothing, just giving me a thinly veiled threat to not do anything brash while in public,” Harry answered. He didn’t think telling Ron about Hermione’s future lessons from hell was a smart idea just then. They would find out soon enough, anyway.

“Yeah, my mum was giving Fred and George an earful about that earlier,” Ron said gravely. “To which George had a number of good jokes, none of which were appreciated.”

“I can imagine.”

“But hey! It’s been almost, what? Fifteen minutes? And nothing horrible has happened yet, so that’s something!”

“There also hasn’t been that much alcohol consumed yet,” Harry pointed out.

“Right. We should work on that.”

Without further comment, they both downed the last of their champagne. Ron took their glasses and traded them out for two fresh ones from a tray—which, Harry noticed with surprise, was floating by itself rather than being carried by a waiter.

“Cheers,” Ron said, handing one to Harry. “I’ve got to be a responsible and dutiful husband now. I must drink enough for the two of us, since Hermione is… well, you know.”

He blushed as he nodded towards Hermione, who was still standing with the Patil twins, Dean, and Seamus. She looked genuinely blissful. With her aura dancing around her—currently warm, fuchsia waves—she was the ideal image of a joyous wife on her wedding day.

“How is she so happy?”

The words left Harry’s mouth before he could think them through.

Ron stared at him.

“I, er… I just mean… She seems to be doing really well,” Harry said. He lowered his voice when he went on, saying, “Considering that, you know… her parents aren’t here.”

And she won’t ever be allowed to see them again, was the unspoken sentiment.

“Yeah,” said Ron uneasily. He looked down, and his magic withered with something like guilt. “Yeah…”

“I just didn’t think she was that good of an actress.”

Ron’s magic withered even more. “Yeah, well,” he said. “She’s not. That great at acting, that is.”

Harry raised a brow at him. “I’m not supposed to tell anyone,” Ron said quickly and quietly. “Me, Fred and George have been sworn to secrecy; I’m honestly surprised that they didn’t force us to take an Unbreakable Vow. I suppose they didn’t want to risk us accidentally killing ourselves…”

“I think I’m allowed to be the exception to that,” Harry muttered. “I’m not exactly about to run off and tell Umbridge you ratted out the Muggle-born Registration Committee.”

Ron’s lips twitched for a moment despite himself, but when he nodded, his magic darkened. “All right, but please don’t tell anyone, especially not Hermione… it can really complicate things. Supposedly it can have adverse effects on the subjects if they become aware… Course, they might just have told us that so I wouldn’t want to say anything, but I dunno. Could be—”

“Ron,” Harry interrupted. “Just tell me.”

Ron swallowed hard. “It’s what they’re doing to those who register, Harry,” he explained. His voice was so low that Harry had to lean forward to hear him above the crowd. “They can’t erase the memories of entire people from someone—such as the muggle parents and friends of a muggle-born—because that would be too complicated. Impossible, actually, unless they’re really, really young. So for the adults who are registering, well…”

His voice trailed off. Harry wanted to shake him he was so impatient to know. “Well?” he prompted in a sharp whisper. “What are they

doing?"

"They're erasing *emotions*," Ron finally said. "Feelings. Not the memories of someone or something outright, but the feelings that were associated with those times and people."

"They can do that?"

"Apparently, because they are," Ron whispered venomously. "So those who register remember their parents and everyone else in their past lives, they just don't *feel* anything when they recall them. It's disgusting. I asked Hermione how she thought her mum was doing the other day, because I just couldn't help it, and she just… she just sort of shrugged. She didn't seem to care at all."

Harry was astounded. "Why in the world…?"

He wasn't even sure what question to ask.

"Because it works," Ron answered anyway, grimly. "It's actually quite genius. People who have been wiped still have all their memories, technically, so they don't think anything is amiss… but they don't *miss* the people in their past anymore. They don't *care*. Don't you see? They don't care about their families so they don't feel tempted to get in touch with them, because they know logically that would be putting them all in danger. It's not just the threat of the Ministry of Magic coming down on you if you try and contact your muggle family… it's a sincere lack of caring about doing it at all. And so far, not a single registered muggle has tried, nor have they shown any signs of wanting to go back to their muggle lives. They're all being monitored very closely."

Ron's magic writhed in a particularly nasty way. "It's like you-know-who woke up one morning and suddenly realized love matters," he said scathingly.

Harry's heart felt like it turned to ice.

He looked at Hermione, who was smiling more radiantly than ever. It was no wonder, then, that she was so easily enjoying herself. She *was* enjoying herself. While she certainly had many reasons to be angry and afraid these days, she was genuinely happy right now, talking with friends that just a few weeks ago she thought she may never see again…

"So, does that mean Dean…?"

Ron nodded. Harry had expected that answer based on the way Dean was also smiling, surrounded by his own, boisterous magic, but it still felt like a cold blow to Harry's gut.

Flash!

Another blinding light caused Harry to curse and Ron to almost drop his glass. A camera had just swooped by, flashing them in their faces as it took a picture. "Get outta here!" Ron said, batting at it. An elderly witch nearby cast him an affronted look. "What? I'm the groom, I'm allowed to do that."

Harry almost had the privilege of laughing when something caught his eye. Something short, toad-like, and horrid. And it was only about twenty feet away. "Shit," he said.

Ron followed his gaze, and instantly his magic swirled in alarm. "Shit," he repeated. "Who invited her?"

"It's *your* wedding, Ron."

"I clearly had no control over the guest list. Or anything else in my life, really."

Umbridge's huge eyes narrowed as they landed on Harry and Ron. Her toxic magic brightened in a very unfriendly manner, and Harry swore it was as though she knew they had just been talking about the Muggle-born Registration committee she was currently the Head of.

"Scatter," Ron said.

Harry didn't need to be told twice. He and Ron both turned and walked away as quickly as they could without full-out running, each taking the easiest escape route. The crowd was thick enough that they became separated, but Harry knew where Ron was going. He would just skirt around the dance floor and get to Hermione and the rest of them from the other side, and—

"Excuse me," said an unexpected voice. It was followed by a touch on his arm, causing Harry to pause. "Would you care to dance?"

A young witch with pale, blue eyes and honey-blonde hair styled into a bun stared up at him. Her royal blue dress was decorated with tiny rhinestones, and even in heels the top of her head only barely came up to Harry's chin. Her magic was light, frothy, and pastel-like. It made Harry think of seafoam.

She smiled at him expectantly. "…Greengrass?" Harry said, baffled.

"I'm glad to see you remember my name," she said. "Well? Are you a gentleman or not? Dance with me, Harry Potter."

Harry was beyond perplexed as Daphne Greengrass slipped her hand into his. Without knowing exactly how it was happening even *as* it was happening, Harry found himself walking side by side with her onto the dance floor, his half-drunk glass of champagne being abandoned along the way.

What in all the hells is this? Harry thought as Greengrass guided him. A new song started, one which was lively but thankfully not too fast. She snaked one arm around his neck and the next thing Harry knew, he was dancing with a Slytherin for all the world to see.

"Close your mouth and smile, or you'll look an utter fool," she said, all while keeping a perfectly cheerful expression on her own face. "There are cameras everywhere, you know."

Oh, I'm very fucking aware, Harry thought but didn't say. He instead forced a grin, trying to remember his dance lessons from years past. It was surprisingly easy—Daphne Greengrass moved with much more grace than Parvati Patil had. "Why did you want to dance with me?" he asked.

He thought it was a pretty good question, but she laughed. "You're a curiosity," she said.

"A curiosity," Harry repeated dully.

"Quite," she said. They turned, going deeper into the dance floor where more couples swayed. "And someone I would like to know a little better."

"Is that right?" Harry asked, his voice becoming duller still. He could not recall a single time Daphne Greengrass had tried to interact with him when they were students at Hogwarts.

Then again, he hadn't tried to talk to her either—but he wasn't the one who'd asked to dance. "Times are changing," she said. "I like to be in the good graces of people who are favored by the Dark Lord, as you so clearly are."

Harry almost tripped. Would have, actually, had Greengrass not tightened her grip around his waist and pivoted with him in a way

that turned his misstep into a twirl.

“Careful,” she said. Her face remained pleasant, but her magic sharpened in annoyance at his clumsiness.

“Favored by the Dark Lord, am I?” Harry repeated. He laughed hollowly. “How d’you gather that?”

“I attended your trial, along with my parents, and I quite agree with their conclusions. The Dark Lord obviously wants to see you rise, or he would never have gone to all that trouble to pardon you. Whether it is because he sees something in you that he respects and wants to use, or he merely enjoys the idea of modeling Dumbledore’s favorite pupil into one of his own is neither here nor there. The Dark Lord favors you, and highly. I mean… just look at you.”

She gave him a knowing look, staring deeply into his eyes. Greengrass’s aura was not despairing, fearful, or horrified, but full of some other emotion.

Reverence, Harry realized.

They turned again, swaying back towards the outskirts of the dance floor. Harry was too shocked to know how to respond.

“Yes, you are destined to rise, Harry Potter… and quickly, if you play your cards right. Everyone knows the fastest way for someone with great potential—new blood, if you will—to do so is through marriage to someone of known standing. Considering your age, disposition, and family lineage through your father’s side, I daresay the witches will be coming at you soon enough… Granted you don’t do something incredibly foolish before then.”

Harry was even more stunned. It took all of his concentration to simply process her words and keep his footing at the same time.

If Greengrass noticed his disorientation, she chose not to comment on it. Instead, she kept dancing easily while talking, her tone carrying with it a slight haughtiness. Harry got the distinct sense that she rather liked telling people *how things were*. “Of course, this reception is full of eligible witches who will be on the hunt. Marrying and producing children is nearly a mandatory action now. ‘The New Regime growing in strength and numbers’—little comments like that have been all over the *Prophet*, surely you’ve noticed.”

Harry *hadn’t* noticed, as he hadn’t been reading every word of the

Prophet, cover to cover—which was a real mistake on his part, he suddenly realized. Evidently, he hadn't learned the lesson of taking the time to pay attention and read between the lines when it came to what news was being broadcast.

He didn't get a chance to voice this thought, however, as Greengrass quickly carried on. "Of course, I don't think it will ever actually come to *forcing* people to marry. An actual Marriage Law, can you imagine? But my parents are still concerned. I don't know why; I've practically been engaged to Dominic Selwyn since I was four. Although I haven't heard from him much lately… He's a year older, you see, so once he graduated Hogwarts things slowed down a bit… I haven't talked to him in weeks, in fact. But he's here. I see him now—he's getting drinks with Draco. Don't *look!"*

She stepped on Harry's toe, her magic flashing in irritation. Harry had just caught a glimpse of the wizard she was describing before he turned to glare at her—Dominic Selwyn was a tall, dark-haired man who was indeed sharing a drink with Draco Malfoy. It appeared to be quite a large group of Slytherins who were gathered around him. Harry didn't recognize them all, but he'd spotted Draco, Pansy Parkinson, and Blaise Zabini.

"What was that for?" Harry hissed.

Greengrass, to his surprise, did not look nearly as annoyed as her aura indicated. She was smiling just as pleasantly as before when she answered. "Because I don't want him to know I'm talking about him, of course. That's my future fiancé. Smile, now."

Harry didn't hesitate to listen this time. He forced a grin just as a camera hovered close to them. Greengrass did one better; she began giggling as though Harry had just said something witty and charming. The camera flashed (Harry did not make the mistake of staring straight at it this time), then floated away.

They made another quick pivot to avoid an oncoming couple—Harry recognized the wizard as the old man who had made more than one outburst at his trial—swinging about with an elderly witch he did not know. It was a quick enough turn that Greengrass's weight shifted uncomfortably far, but somehow Harry found her movement and the music lining up in just such a way that it felt natural for her to bend back into a dip. It was easily the best accidental move he had ever made on the dance floor, and he wasn't even sure how he'd managed it. He grinned despite himself.

“Not bad,” Greengrass said as he pulled her back up, returning them once more to a comfortable, easy sway. “You’re getting better already.”

Harry wasn’t sure if she meant his fake smiles or his dance moves. Perhaps both. “Why aren’t you dancing with Selwyn, then?” he asked. “If he’s your future fiancé. Do you not want to be with him?”

“Oh, no—of course I do. I’m dancing with you because I want to make him jealous, and *you* were the best person to do that with.”

Harry gave her a confused look. She quirked an eyebrow and tilted her head towards the crowd, as though to say, *Haven’t you noticed?*

And it was only then, as Harry let his focus drift from trying to dance decently and keep his composure, that he really saw it. People were watching them—lots of people. Almost everyone who was not on the dance floor was casting him and Greengrass looks that were more intrigued now than wary. Harry saw it in their magic, too. Their auras, which were more neutrally suspicious before, were shifting into something else. Some sweeter, some angrier, some almost… *hungry*.

“So… you’re using me,” Harry said blankly.

“Of course,” said Greengrass. “Oh, don’t look so *wounded*; you’re gaining just as much from this display as I am. I am a *Greengrass*. They’re all coming to the same conclusion that I already have as we speak. About you, I mean. I’ve just a bit quicker than most. I got to dance with the handsome, infamous Harry Potter first.”

She winked at him. Harry felt his cheeks growing warm.

“I just wish my little sister was as smart as I was. Astoria is still *so* naïve. She’s been *obsessed* with Draco ever since he visited our summer home, and she started flirting with him the moment this reception began. If she keeps it up much longer Pansy might hex her.”

Harry risked glancing in the group’s direction. There was, in fact, a girl who looked almost like a carbon copy of Daphne, only smaller and with more pixie-like features. She was batting her lashes at Draco, who didn’t seem to know what to make of having a witch several years his junior vying for his attention. Harry caught a glimpse of their aura’s together. Surprisingly, they were quite similar—both light and airy. But where Draco’s was colorless, Astoria’s was a very light blue, almost periwinkle, with a slight glint to it that Draco’s lacked. Together, they made Harry think of a glittering frost on a cool winter

morning.

Next to Draco, however, was a magic that could not have been more different. Pansy Parkinson's aura was a deep green, and it bore a strange, waxy texture. If Daphne's magic was seafoam, then Pansy's was seaweed. It fanned out around her in thick strands, and Harry could tell that her hostility was all for Astoria.

It was absolutely astonishing, though, because while her magic was swirling with envy and rage, Parkinson's expression was so… sweet. Her smile was convincingly genuine as she looked at the younger Greengrass, listening to her babble on to Draco while secretly wanting to crush her for doing so.

Harry looked back at his dance partner. He was amazed that she had been able to glean that. If he, Harry, hadn't gained the ability to perceive magical auras, he would have never known. "You're very perceptive, Greengrass," he said.

She smiled. "Please, call me Daphne."

Harry hesitated for a moment but then nodded. "All right, Daphne," he said. Calling a Slytherin girl he barely knew by her first name felt odd, but Harry supposed that was just his life now. Then, knowing it was the proper thing to do, he said, "Call me Harry."

Her magic warmed. "Of course, Harry," she said. "And yes, I like to think I notice things. Trust me when I say there is nothing more vicious than a witch's wrath. You men think you run the wizarding world, but the true power lies with the witches."

Harry frowned. He thought of Hermione and her many displays of power—her impressive spellwork that ranged from golden birds that could turn vicious in a moment to dark curses that could permanently cut off limbs. "I've never thought that," he said.

"Really? How many witches do you know who have publicly risen with a tyrannical thirst for power?"

Harry considered this. While he knew there were many witches who served in positions of power in the Ministry, he could not think of any who had attempted to become Dark Lords. There were only two of those that he knew of, and as far as he was aware, the only woman who had risen in station in that setting at all was Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Exactly," said Daphne when Harry didn't answer. "Witches'

influential power typically comes from something much more subtle but infinitely more dangerous. Manipulations. Seductions. For every wizard you see here, there either has, is, or will be a witch who really pulls the strings. For example…"

They turned, and Daphne nodded in the direction of another couple dancing not far from them. It was Lucius and Narcissa. "Do you think Lucius Malfoy would dare make any decisions without Narcissa's explicit permission and blessing?"

Harry watched them sway. Lucius's magic, which was similar to Draco's, seemed so soft compared to Narcissa's. Her navy aura, while currently swirling pleasantly with her husband's, was clearly weightier, far more powerful. Harry didn't doubt for a moment that she would best him in a duel if it came to that.

"Nope, sure don't," Harry agreed.

"Some of us are better at it than others, granted. Like Blaise's mum. *That* woman… well, do I really need to say anything?"

They turned again, and Harry had no doubt as to who it was that Daphne nodded at. Mrs. Zabini had the same dark skin and catlike eyes as her son. Her reputation was accurate—she was exceptionally beautiful. Mrs. Zabini's magic shone like polished copper, bright and tinny. The three wizards whom she was talking to paled in comparison. Even to Harry, even if he couldn't sense the feelings in their magic, it was obvious that they were smitten with her. They all boldly competed for her attention.

"Nope, sure don't," Harry repeated with a grin.

Daphne laughed. "The wizards wear the crowns, but the witches *really* run the show."

The music shifted as a new song began. Around them, Harry saw some people bowing to one another and trading partners. Daphne didn't step away from him, however, and soon they were continuing their dance—and their conversation—into the next song.

Harry didn't mind. He was honestly intrigued by everything she was saying. "Why are you telling me all this?" he asked as he lifted his arm above her head, prompting her to twirl. She smiled as she did.

"So that you are aware, Harry," she answered once she had folded back into his arms. Harry felt more eyes watching them, but he did his

best to ignore them. “I have had the privilege of growing up in a proper pureblood household with respectable parents who care for me, deeply. You grew up with filth. If we are to be friends, it only feels right that I should help you. And I would like to think that we may one day be friends.”

Harry paid close attention to the way her magic stirred. It was light and cheerful—genuine. She meant what she was saying. “A friendship purely out of self-interest? Since I’m going to rise, obviously.”

“Of course. What else are friendships for?”

Harry frowned, for he could tell it was a serious question. He wondered who *really* had the worst of it by the way they had been raised. The Dursley’s may have been terrible to him, but at least he understood what true friendship was. “Never mind,” he mumbled.

Daphne shrugged. “I mean it though, Harry,” she went on. “You must be wary of the women who will try to claim you. They won’t do so in such obvious ways. Pureblooded witches are highly skilled in the art of deception. We’ve been taught from a young age how to weave the most intricate of webs… anything for power.”

“Sure that isn’t just a Slytherin thing?” Harry asked dryly.

“*Please*,” said Daphne, rolling her eyes. “Just because our house is the most well known for being cunning doesn’t mean others are incapable. Witches from every house will be after you. Watch out for the occasional, sly Hufflepuff. They’re out there.”

She laughed, and Harry wasn’t sure if she was joking or not.

“You’ll be sought after soon, Harry, mark my words. Of course, you’re not the brightest star in the sky… The Dark Lord is the real prize.”

Harry almost stumbled again, but somehow pivoted, once more turning a near mishap into a spin that sent Daphne’s dress flying out about her. She giggled as they whirled about.

“The Dark Lord is a *prize*?” Harry asked the moment their twirling ended. It baffled him that anyone would think of Voldemort that way.

“Obviously. If I was far stupider and unaware of my station, I might even be one of the fools thinking I could get the chance to dance with him tonight. Look at these desperate witches, searching for him. Have you not noticed? But he’s not here, is he? I imagine he’s left.”

Harry raised his brows at her in surprise. “Why do you think that?” he asked.

“I would have left if I were him,” she said. “A wedding reception with champagne flowing freely, filled with desperate young witches? I don’t imagine the Dark Lord would want to deal with all that for long. Doesn’t seem the type. He may look young and handsome again, but he’s not. He’d probably find all that terribly exhausting, if not just irritating.”

Harry was once more impressed. “You are *very* preceptive, Daphne,” he said.

“Yes, well,” she said, brushing the compliment aside. “One does wonder who the lucky witch shall be—the one to possibly pull on *those* strings of power. If there even is one, that is. Bellatrix Lestrange might have been a solid bet—there is a rumor that she and the Dark Lord were once lovers, years ago—but I, as well as many others, think her race has been run, so to speak. Not to mention that pesky inconvenience of a husband she has.”

Harry's stomach churned, but whether it was at the thought of Bellatrix and Voldemort being together or something else, he wasn’t sure. “Right,” he said. His tongue felt suddenly dry in the mouth. “Some lucky witch. If there even is one.”

“I suppose it doesn’t warrant further speculation tonight, at any rate,” said Daphne. “He’s not here. The others will soon pick up on that if they haven’t already. And you, well… You might just be next in line, Harry.”

She looked deeply into his eyes again, her magic glistening with that same reverence.

The song ended. This time Daphne let her arms fall from around his neck.

“Thank you, Daphne,” Harry said, removing his arms from her waist. He bowed politely. “For your… expert guidance.”

“But Harry,” Daphne said. She grabbed his hand and held it tightly. “It was *you* who was leading the whole time!”

She raised her hand in his, lifting it towards his face. There was a second where Harry was confused, unsure what it was he was supposed to be doing, but then it clicked. He kissed the back of her

hand like a gentleman, and to anyone watching it looked as though Harry had made the decision to do so, not Daphne.

He realized then just how deeply her skills ran. Throughout their dance, she had turned his near-stumbles into something graceful; every time she had wanted to point out a specific witch or wizard they happened to be there, right in their line of sight. She had been in complete control the entire time, guiding every step… but it surely hadn't looked like that to anyone else.

She's good, Harry thought, half in admiration and half perturbed.

Daphne curtseyed and blushed when he released her hand. Then she leaned forward, and in a sharp whisper said, "Beware the webs they weave!"

She smirked, then turned and disappeared onto the dance floor. Harry was left scratching the back of his head, trying to process everything she'd told him.

A new song began—a slow, romantic number. The atmosphere changed. All around him partners were bowing out and switching, and while some couples left dozens more filtered out onto the floor. Harry beamed when he saw Mr. and Mrs. Weasley emerge, and smiled just as widely when Hermione and Ron once more began to dance.

It was then that Harry noticed the looks being cast his way.

He had to hand it to Daphne—she appeared to be right. Harry accidentally locked eyes with more than a few witches just then, all of whom were staring at the now partner-less Harry Potter. Some were even coming towards him. Harry swallowed thickly and looked down. He didn't think he could handle any more attention from strangers.

He was just about to make his way into crowd, away from the dance floor, when he heard her.

"Harry?"

Harry swore the entire ballroom froze.

He turned, slowly, his breath held and his heart in his throat… and there she was.

Ginny.

She was every bit as beautiful as she had been on Bill and Fleur's wedding day—no, more beautiful. Her dress was a pale silver that glistened with a soft, pearlescent sheen, and she wore her long, wavy hair loose. And her *magic*. Ginny's magic was everything he'd imagined it might be. Bright and luminous, a cheerful, gorgeous pink. It made Harry think of flower petals fluttering in a summer breeze.

Harry tried to say her name, but he couldn't. His mouth seemed to no longer obey his will. He just stared, his lips slightly parted, totally useless.

How many times had he wanted to think of her, but had not allowed it? How many times had he wanted to dream about her eyes, her smile, the way she laughed; to wonder what it would be like to breathe in her flowery scent just one more time? But he never let himself, because to dream of her would have been too heartbreaking, too awful…

But here she was. Her brown eyes warmed as she looked at him.

"Hey, stranger," she said. She smiled and her magic glowed, blooming like a sunrise.

"Hey," Harry managed to choke out, barely.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry swore he saw movement. Not of other dancers, but of Mrs. Weasley, shooing people away from them—possibly with a wand she shouldn't have had drawn at a wedding reception. Harry wasn't sure. All he knew was that Ginny was smiling at him and she was here, really here, and when he lifted his hand towards her, she took it without hesitation.

Dancing with Ginny was as easy as breathing.

She didn't say anything as he held her, swaying slowly to the rhythm of this much gentler song. When they made eye contact, she did not flinch or react in any way to his scarlet eyes that should have, rightfully, frightened her. She only smiled and leaned her head against his chest, and if other people were watching, Harry didn't notice or care. It was just him and Ginny, and there was nothing else. No wars lost, no political intrigues, no pureblood society to navigate. Everything was so simple with her in his arms.

Which was part of what was so amazing about being with Ginny. When he was with her, he was not the Boy Who Lived or the Chosen One, some supposed hero trying to figure out what his great destiny

was or what a prophecy might mean.

He was just Harry, holding the girl he had first given his heart to. A thousand cameras might have gone off then, and Harry wouldn't have been any the wiser.

Harry didn't know how long they danced; the music seemed to go on forever. While he might have been imagining it, Harry thought that everyone around them seemed to move aside to give them more space. He didn't care either way. Harry closed his eyes and breathed in Ginny's perfume, reveling in the sensation of her magic. He wondered what their auras looked like right now, mingling together as they danced. Gold and petal pink. He imagined it was stunning.

Harry barely registered leaving the dance floor. He only looked up, dazedly, to see that they were going outside, beneath the canopy of roses. The music was quieter out here. Harry looked at Ginny, confused.

She still didn't say anything. Ginny only smiled—a bit mischievously, he thought—as she held his hand, leading him past the roses, past the lingering, smaller crowds. She led him into the sparse woods, where the only lights illuminating the world were scattered fairies, twinkling stars, and a crescent moon. Where they were hidden in the shadows of a willow tree.

She turned and stopped then. Ginny's magic fluctuated with something like uncertainty. She bit her bottom lip and, with a slight hesitation, reached up to touch Harry's face.

Harry didn't have the same hesitation. He grabbed her by the waist and pulled her forward, pressing his lips to hers.

It was a familiar kiss. It was the same intensity as when she had invited him into her bedroom, the walls as bright and pink as her aura. It was a kiss of desperation; it was full of yearning and passion.

It only stopped when she made a sudden, high sound, and Harry felt something on her face. Something wet. He pulled away, perplexed and worried to see that her eyes were full of tears.

She wiped them away hurriedly, looking embarrassed, her face flushing along with her magic. "I'm sorry," she said. To his surprise, she let out a choked and watery laugh. "I know you hate it when the girls you kiss cry."

At first Harry was simply confused, but then he realized she was talking about his first kiss with Cho. He wondered who had told her that story—Hermione? Probably—but then realized he didn't care. Despite everything, Harry found himself laughing as well.

He tried to think of something to say, something funny and charming, but he still couldn't come up with anything. Ginny didn't seem to mind. She grabbed him by the collar and pulled him down towards her again, enveloping him in another wild kiss.

Harry was engulfed by her magic. Her hands slid down his chest, slipping beneath his outer dress robes to skim the thin fabric of his shirt. Harry's fingers were tangled in her hair, touching her face, her neck, her collar bones as the thin strap of her dress fell off her shoulder. She gripped his waist and Harry felt his blood rushing and his head spinning. He let one arm fall to graze the hem of her dress, trailing up her thigh, and as Harry kissed her neck Ginny let out a breathy moan—

A lightning strike of pain exploded across Harry's forehead.

Instantly Harry recoiled, hissing in agony as his vision blurred, bloody and chaotic. His scar was on fire as emotions stormed his mind, emotions which were certainly not his—rage; undiluted, *violent* rage.

"Harry?" Ginny said. Harry could barely hear her voice over the sudden thundering of his heart, but her magic was bright with worry.

"I have to go, I have to go—I'm sorry, I just—don't follow me, *please* Ginny, *please*—"

Ginny started to say something, but Harry never heard it. He turned and ran, sprinting as quickly as he could through the trees. He needed to get away from Ginny, and he needed to get away from her *now*. Harry ran and ran, deeper into the woods, hoping with all his heart that Ginny was not coming after him. He barely dodged trees and their spindly limbs and their fallen branches as he ran, his world an adrenaline-soaked blur.

The pain escalated sharply and suddenly. Harry froze, leaning against a tree—the pain was so intense now that it was difficult to breathe, let alone run. Nearby, he felt it. That familiar magic was like a black, putrid shadow. The fairies in the vicinity all vanished in its presence, leaving the world in near-total darkness.

Lord Voldemort had returned.

Ruination

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry's heart slammed against his ribcage. He stood with his back pressed firmly against the tree, his legs shaking. His head absolutely pounded with pain. From perhaps ten feet away, Voldemort's rage was a horrid, furious cyclone.

A moment passed, and then another, and nothing horrific happened. Harry's jumped to the obvious conclusion—Voldemort was here, nearby, but he did not yet know exactly where Harry was… He was behind him, on the other side of the tree which he now leaned against…

Moving as silently as he could, Harry pulled the Invisibility Cloak from his pocket. His fingers trembled as he draped it over himself. He felt a twinge of relief as he did—the silky fabric was smooth, familiar, and carried with it a sense of security.

A hopeful feeling that was quickly dashed. Harry recalled that day in Azkaban yet again—Voldemort had been able to see him through the cloak then, so surely he would be able to now.

A slight footstep sounded, though Harry could not yet tell if it was coming towards him or not. He held his breath.

"Harry… Do you truly still think you can hide from me?"

Voldemort's voice was cool and calm, too calm. It was easily the most frightening tone Harry had ever heard him use.

"We are not playing hide and seek…"

The memory stormed Harry's mind—those were the exact words Voldemort had called to him as he hid behind a gravestone, fourteen years old and certain he was about to die.

But Harry had not given up then, and he would not do so now, either. He was not that tragic boy who could not control himself any longer; he could keep Voldemort's emotions from harming him.

Pushing the memory of the graveyard aside, Harry instead recalled the

night he buried Dobby, digging with an old shovel, his hands calloused and hurting. The pain in his scar ebbed away.

He could figure a way out of this. The reception was not so far—Harry could see the lights through the trees, glimmering in the distance. The dulled sounds of the party were like an oasis, and if he could just make it there—to the crowds of people, to the many watching eyes and floating cameras—then he would be safe.

Temporarily, at least.

Still, Harry would do anything to get away from Voldemort when his rage was so paramount. He was lethal right now; more deadly toxicity laced his aura than Harry had ever felt. He was honestly worried for his life. That anger, and that *power*, was a combination that would undoubtedly result in devastation.

Voldemort did not have restraint.

More footsteps, and Harry could tell now—he was not moving towards him. Voldemort was, somehow, blessedly, walking in the opposite direction; Harry could sense his aura drifting further away. Harry felt a new spark of hope. Voldemort knew he was near, yes, but he did not yet know *exactly* where he was.

But if Voldemort could see him through the cloak… then he couldn't move. The moment he stepped from behind the tree he was using as a shield, Voldemort would see him, and he would be done.

But how, *how* was Voldemort able to see him through the cloak? It was infallible, it was a *Hallow*… No one, not even Dumbledore had been able to see him while he was under it…

But Harry had long had a suspicion about how: *his eyes.*

Somehow, with whatever dark magic he had used to restore his sight, the Dark Lord could always find Harry's eyes. When he had looked at him through the cloak, he had been able to meet his gaze right away, looking directly into Harry's eyes, the ones which were now exactly like his.

Did that mean he could see through his eyes whenever he wanted, then? The way he, Harry, sometimes saw through Voldemort's? Or was it residual magic that he could sense because it was his own spell that allowed Harry to see so well?

Harry wasn't sure, and he knew it was all a wild conjecture anyway—but it was the only reason he could come up with. The resulting realization was not a welcome one.

If Voldemort could see through his eyes, or see him because of it in any way, he could not use them.

"Come out, Harry… Come out and play…"

He was still moving, slowly, but no longer in the wrong direction. Voldemort was circling. Soon, he would come closer to where Harry was, and then it would be over.

Harry knew he could not stay still. He needed to move, and it was now or never.

Swallowing hard, Harry closed his eyes… and quietly stepped from behind the tree. He braced himself for an immediate curse; for manic laughter and unfathomable pain.

Nothing happened.

Voldemort continued his casual, predatory pace, and Harry kept his eyes shut. He knew which direction he needed to go in. Straight ahead, towards the distant sounds of the party. He took another shaky step forward, thankful that it was Spring and not Fall. If the ground had been covered in dry leaves, he would have had no hope. He could only pray that he did not step on a twig or snap a branch. Moving blindly through these trees would not be easy, but, well, he'd done much crazier things and made it out alive, hadn't he?

Harry could not see, no… but he could *sense*.

Voldemort's aura was continuing to circle widely, like a black shark in already dark waters. Harry took a steadying breath and kept walking, away from the monster, towards the light. He may not have been able to see the glow of the reception with his eyes closed, but he could sense the magical auras of all those who were gathered there. As he focused on it, they became clearer, brighter. It was a cacophony of color there, a prismatic sanctuary.

He just needed to get to it.

"Why are you hiding from me, Harry?" Voldemort called. His voice was low and lilting. "Are you *afraid*?"

Harry bit his tongue and kept walking. He moved at a painfully slow pace, but it was necessary—being unable to see meant he had to move with his arms out, pushing aside any branches he touched. He desperately hoped that his Cloak would not catch on any of the twigs; he doubted he would be able to untangle it without opening his eyes or making noise.

Harry stopped when he heard footsteps not behind him, but in front of him, and much closer. Oh God, had he apparated? Was Voldemort right in front of him now, coming towards him; was he—

But no. Harry focused, and knew this was not the case. There *were* footsteps in front of him, moving towards him… but no one was there. No magical auras accompanied the sound. Voldemort's aura remained exactly where it had been, behind him and to his right, where he had now stopped moving.

It was a trick.

Voldemort had cast some kind of spell to make it sound like he was walking elsewhere, presumably to startle Harry and cause him to run away, in the other direction…

Right into Voldemort's arms.

And It would have worked! Harry would have done exactly that, had he not been able to sense Voldemort's magic. That black aura was twitching in anticipation now, expectant, confirming what Harry just thought. This was another of Voldemort's tricks.

Fuck him, fuck him, fuck him, Harry thought. He kept walking, right into what he knew was an illusion. He walked beyond the prowling, fake footsteps, and it was like passing through a ghost.

Voldemort's magic whirled in frustration when Harry did not react to his trap, suddenly running and giving himself away. "Harry," he said. The lilting tone had taken on a sharper edge. "You know you cannot escape me."

I know nothing of the sort, Harry thought bitterly. He kept walking. He was making progress… The reception was getting louder; soon he would be able to make out voices and differentiate between the many auras there. If he could get a little closer, he might be able to risk calling out to someone… Voldemort would find him then, but so too would everyone else… Those floating cameras, which he had detested with every fiber of his being just minutes ago, would be his saving

grace…

"…Find him…"

Voldemort's voice had become so quiet that it was barely a whisper. His magic had also changed—it shifted in its blackness to something slightly less murderous; a tiny and fleeting glimmer of gold flickered in Harry's mind. He felt it span out like a mist, a sheen of glistening darkness flooding the sparse forest.

"…find him, find him…"

Harry froze. That voice had not belonged to Voldemort.

"…find him, find him…"

What the fuck, Harry thought, for now there were multiple voices, coming from more than one place…

"…find him, find him, find him…"

More voices, but it must have been some new kind of trick, because Harry did not sense any magical auras now, either… but these voices, they were coming closer, surrounding him, and there was something terribly familiar about them…

"…find him, find him…"

They were chorusing and they were encircling him from every side, around him but below him somehow, as though the blades of grass could chant. Confused but unsure what else he could do, and still not daring to open his eyes, Harry took another shaky step forward, his heart thundering—

"Sssssmell him…"

That voice *had* belonged to Voldemort. It was louder now, and his magic flashed when he spoke—it was swelling with triumph, blooming in blackness—

Paseltongue, Harry realized suddenly; his voice sounded so strange now because he was speaking in paseltongue… Which meant that the voices he was hearing, those which did not carry magical auras with them—

Unable not to, Harry looked down. He could *feel* the blood as it rushed from his face, leaving him light-headed.

Snakes. A dozen of them, maybe more, were slithering around him and towards him, their heads raised and tongues flickering like mad. One was only inches from his feet, looking as though it were about to strike.

"Sssssmell him…" it hissed. The others chorused with it.

"…ssssmell him, ssssmell him…"

Harry did not know what to do. His mind was frozen in horror; he could not think. He could not even close his eyes again. He stood, useless, petrified as the snakes surrounded him, getting closer, hunting him and trapping him and—

One snake slithered over the toe of his shoe, curling against the fabric of the cloak.

"He issss here…"

Harry ran.

He bolted, running faster than he ever had. The cloak fell from his shoulders, but he held it in one hand, dashing wildly through the trees and sprinting towards the reception for all he was worth. Behind him, over the sounds of his heavy footsteps and erratic breathing, he heard laughter—sinister and low.

He did not make it far.

Just as Harry had taken a breath to scream, the air was knocked from his lungs. Harry was pulled backward, viciously fast, deeper into the woods and away from salvation. Into darkness.

The world blurred as Harry was flung, harshly, onto the forest floor, landing on his back and biting his tongue in his fall. He rolled to one side and coughed, dropping his cloak. Blood splattered the silver fabric.

He barely had time to wipe his mouth with the back of his sleeve before he was wrenched upwards. Magic—Voldemort's black, possessive magic—wrapped itself around him, suspending him in midair. Harry couldn't move his arms and legs; he was bound by Voldemort's hellacious aura. It coiled around him like a serpent.

And there he was. The Dark Lord stood before him, his eyes blood red and blazing, his magic fierce and black.

“Don’t—”

Harry didn’t get the chance to say anything other than that, for the Dark Lord had moved, with lightning speed, to grasp his throat. “You are mine,” he seethed. There was no fake smoothness to his tone now, only cold, hard anger. “Mine and no one else’s, forever, *mine*.”

His mouth crashed over Harry’s. That buoyant magic exploded, and Harry’s mind was wiped blank by the sudden, overwhelming bliss.

Voldemort’s tongue ravaged his own, possessive and demanding. One hand remained on his throat while the other moved to his hair, yanking his head back, forcing him into compliancy. Somewhere in the back of his addled mind, Harry registered that such force should have hurt. But it didn’t.

That light was all-encompassing, more vibrant than ever before, swirling with such powerful emotions that it was impossible to process them—fury, jealousy, longing. It was beautiful and it was horrible; that lovely weightlessness, mingling with Voldemort’s dark and toxic need. It was too much to handle, too much, Harry *couldn’t*—

Stop, he thought, and it took all his willpower to form even that coherent plea. *Stop, stop, you’re hurting me*—

Am I?

Harry was shoved backward by his throat, his back slammed against a tree. Voldemort was holding him so tightly that he could barely breathe.

Only this time, Harry feared he may not let go.

“You should *hurt,”* Voldemort said, and Harry could tell that it was still parseltongue. As though from many miles away, the snakes that had damned him echoed the Dark Lord’s words—a haunting chorus emanating from the ground.

“Hurt him, hurt him, hurt him…”

Please, Harry thought desperately, for Voldemort’s grip on his throat made it impossible to speak. He did not know what would cause him to pass out first—the overabundance of dizzying and conflicting magic, or the lack of air. *Please, please*—

Voldemort’s grasp loosened, allowing Harry to draw in a much-needed

breath. His magic gleamed hungrily.

"Ssssay it," he hissed. He wrapped one arm around Harry's waist, disturbingly gently, twining around him like the tendrils of his magic. He leaned into Harry's neck and inhaled through his nose, slowly, like he was taking in the scent of his fear and treasuring it. His lips grazed Harry's ear when he spoke again.

"Beg for me."

Harry did not hesitate—there was no room for pride nor stubbornness when he was so distraught. There was only fear. "P-please," he gasped. "Please, Voldemort, I—"

At the sound of his name, followed by the begging he had so longed to hear, Voldemort's magic curled in delight. He once more crashed his mouth over Harry's, and the familiar, buoyant feeling—along with the sickly want—twisted around him, making Harry's head pound and his soul sing all at once.

"*Yesss*," Voldemort hissed. He ran his tongue along the shell of Harry's ear. "*More…*"

Voldemort's hand slipped from his throat, dipping under his shirt, grazing his chest. The toxic yearning from Voldemort's aura was growing, and it was infinitely more dangerous than his rage.

Harry wasn't sure what he should do. Obeying Voldemort didn't seem to be making things better; on the contrary, it seemed to be making things infinitely worse.

"Beg for me, Harry…"

Harry swallowed hard, taking in laboring breaths as his thoughts spiraled. He didn't know what to do; he couldn't think straight, he couldn't do anything—he pushed against Voldemort with as much force as he could muster, his arms shaking and feeble—

Voldemort's mouth found his throat, where he viciously kissed him. His aura was suffocating as he pressed himself against Harry's body, an undeniable cloud of lust. A moan tore through the air, ragged and deep, and it took Harry a moment to realize that it had come from his own lips.

Voldemort's aura became livelier at the sound, feverish almost. Harry was lost in it, it was all there was, it was—

All there was, all that mattered was what made up this terrible miracle before him; the way his heart thrummed like a hypnotic, alluring drum; the way his face flushed, a tempting, sweet pink that was stained on one cheek with the blood he had hurriedly wiped away—that skin was yearning for his dominant touch, his swollen lips were begging for his owning kiss; and his magic, that beautiful, pure magic was too enticing, too stunning to be left unravaged any longer—he belonged to him*, and he would claim him in every way—*

Harry blinked, dazed at the momentary lapse into Voldemort's mind. His emotions were still bleeding into his as he saw through his own eyes again, Voldemort's piercing gaze level with his own as he pressed his forehead to Harry's.

"Beg," Voldemort commanded again. *"Beg for me, sweetness…"*

He ran his tongue along Harry's throat, causing him to shudder. The lust that tore its way up his spine was irrefutable, but whether it was his own or an effect of Voldemort's covetousness, Harry could not tell. *"Ah,"* he gasped sharply. Harry could feel the victory in Voldemort's aura as he reduced Harry to this, unable to say or do anything at all.

His pull on his magic was too strong; Voldemort was draining Harry of whatever light he had. It was becoming difficult to focus on anything, unable to even lift his arms—Harry was a prisoner to Voldemort's consuming nature.

The Dark Lord didn't seem to notice.

Voldemort, smiling sardonically, seemed to think Harry's sudden lack of retaliation meant he did not *want* to retaliate. He was greedily drinking in his magic, running his hands down Harry's chest and reveling in the light that bloomed at his touch.

When he reached between Harry's legs, another unsolicited moan erupted from deep in Harry's throat. It was too much…

Voldemort laughed breathily. *"Mine,"* he leered, grabbing Harry's cock with what was probably too much force. But Harry couldn't feel any pain. All he felt was that sickening combination of need and weightlessness, of blackness and light. His mind was beginning to go numb from the onslaught of it; he could feel his body shutting down.

"…mine, mine, mine…"

The forest blended and blurred together as Voldemort, in a wicked,

wandless way, managed to vanish Harry's robes. Harry didn't even see how he had done it; he only felt the sudden exposure of his skin to the summer night air, to the rough bark of the tree against his back.

Harry felt like he was watching what was happening from someone else's perspective—not from his, and not from Voldemort's, either. It was as though he had floated, up and to one side, like one of the magical cameras from the party. He was outside of his body. His mind rang with a hollow horror.

"Mine…"

Voldemort had not removed his robes entirely, but he had shifted them low enough. With almost no effort at all he had Harry's legs lifted high, suspended upwards. Harry was mortifyingly vulnerable and exposed. Although he could hardly process the feeling, he knew that Voldemort was pressed against him, hot and hard, ready to ruin him.

He wished he could have gathered the strength to say or do anything. He couldn't. Harry was useless as Voldemort, without any further warning, slammed himself inside him.

Harry once more had the strangely detached and logical thought that this should hurt. A lot. But again, it didn't.

Harry felt like he'd fallen from the heavens, crashing back into his own body like a star falling from the sky. Or perhaps it was Voldemort's body he had fallen into. For *glorious* was the only word he that came to him. Blinding pleasure, and Harry was immediately drowned in it. A throaty moan filled his ears.

Ah, ah… yessss….

There was no way to describe the bliss that filled his mind; there was nothing but pleasure as his spine arched and his blood pounded, unsure where he began and Voldemort began… He felt a tight, throbbing heat as he thrust forward again, and oh, *oh…*

There were nails dragging across his thighs, but Harry felt only light.

There were teeth digging into his shoulder, a groan burning in his skin as blood bloomed, but Harry felt airy and high.

It came in waves, pleasure crashing over him again and again, harder each time. He was surely going to pass out from this feeling alone; his

nerve-endings would implode and then he would never feel anything ever again.

Just as he had that thought, Voldemort's magic coiled in a peculiar new way, becoming more tightly wound. Harry could tell what was going to happen just before it did.

When Voldemort came, Harry felt it, too—an explosion of ecstasy so strong that Harry's whole world went white. He would have screamed, had he any strength to do so. Instead a silent cry filled his throat, going nowhere, sounding like nothing.

Voldemort shuddered against him. His chest was heaving, his magic was twitching and glinting erratically… and then, gradually, it calmed.

It was like someone had vanished the sun in the middle of a bright summer's day.

The blissful connection between them vanished. Harry suddenly felt very cold, and very dizzy, and very… wrong. His whole body buzzed in an uncanny way. His vision swam as he looked over Voldemort's shoulder, for the Dark Lord was still leaning into him, breathing heavily against his arm. The tree branches swayed in the breeze. Gentle though it was, the feeling of wind caused Harry's skin to prickle.

He felt him. Inside of him, hard and pulsing, even still.

Harry wasn't sure how long Voldemort held him there, resting his head against his naked body as he gathered himself. Harry's own head felt far too heavy to hold up on his own; his skull rested against the tree behind him. It took all he had to cling to consciousness.

Eventually, whether it had been a second or a minute or an hour, Voldemort stepped away, pulling out of his ravaged horcrux. His magic continued to hold him up, for which Harry supposed he should have been grateful, or he would have fallen at once.

There was a sharp, hot pain when Voldemort removed himself. A whimper tumbled out of Harry's lips. Voldemort looked amused at the sound, but then his eyes trailed downwards, and the expression vanished. His magic turned into a sheet of motionless black.

Harry's heavy head fell forward, and he followed the Dark Lord's gaze. *That is a lot of blood,* he thought blankly.

The corners of Harry's vision began to rapidly dim. Letting his head loll to one side, he caught the way Voldemort's face had changed, how his eyes were alight in horror.

"Tom?"

It was Harry's lips that had moved and the word was spoken in his voice, cracking and raw, but he couldn't have said that, because he had never made the choice and his ability to speak had left him long ago.

The dark edges bled inwards, consuming his sight, and Harry knew no more.

Chapter End Notes

fanart by nessa-saoirs

fanart by mshanna28

An Offering of Peace

Harry resurfaced from some warm, shapeless place feeling pleasantly numb.

He was laying on his side, swaddled in a soft and satiny cocoon, his head resting on a pillow that felt like it was made of silk. The air smelled a little stale, almost… old. It made him think of his cupboard under the stairs. The fire that crackled softly from the other side of the room did little to mask the dusty musk.

He couldn't open his eyes, though he did try. They felt as heavy as lead. Someone laid a hand on his forehead, a gentle touch, and a light, pale yellow magic flourished over him. It was not an aura that Harry recognized, but he found it comforting. The hand moved away.

"He'll be fine," murmured a voice. "Just fine. All he needs now is rest."

A dark and glistening aura shook in the shadows.

The pale yellow magic swept over him in a wave, and Harry slipped back into the warm, shapeless place.

All was bright and colorless. An old man in white robes with white hair and electric blue eyes looked at him, a solemn expression carved into every line of his aged face.

"It is far easier to forgive others," he said, "than it is to forgive oneself."

Harry stared at him, confused. The way the whiteness of his robes and hair bled into the world behind him made it look as though the old man was hardly there at all. His eyes alone stood out, like two tiny, neon lights, his reflective half-moon glasses making them shine brighter still.

"Remember that, won't you?"

A warm current crawled across Harry's skin, and the old man was gone.

The next time he awoke, Harry felt… better.

No less warm but slightly less numb, though he did not yet feel himself. Harry was on his other side now, and when he tried to open his eyes, he managed to do so with effort. He was facing a wall…. A very gaudy wall, he thought. And obviously very aged. The wallpaper, which was covered in a washed-out, floral design, was peeling. There was something familiar about it, but Harry couldn't think straight enough to figure out what it was. The fire was still burning. It made the shadows from the peeling paper dance in lazy to-and-fros.

Harry was about to try and sit up when he noticed Voldemort's magic.

Lustrous and pulsing. It was brighter than usual; still black but not as frigid nor as consuming. It was throbbing slightly, glistening with every movement like an iridescent heartbeat. Harry perceived it in a muted fascination as he stared at the wall.

Voldemort did not know he was awake.

Of that, Harry was certain. The steady pulsing of his magic and the emotions that it held told him that much. Anxiety, fear, self-loathing. An impatience that was conflicted as, at the same time, he waited patiently. Harry wondered what he looked like right now. Was he standing with his hands folded in front of him as though in prayer, like when he had waited in the forest, prepared to die? Was he lurking in the corner, hiding in the shadows as he had when Harry was in the dungeons, blind and secretly aware? Or was this some new form of patiently waiting, impatiently? The shadows flickered across the faded imagery of magnolias and roses on the wallpaper, and Harry wondered.

Harry wondered.

He had so many questions and fears he did not know what to ask, or how. He started by sitting up.

Voldemort's aura flashed in a surprised wave of gold, and Harry's head swam. From the magic, from the rush of blood. His vision was a little hazy, but as he blinked a few times, the world came into clearer view. He was in a room… a bedroom? There was a rug near the fire and in the corner was an armchair. An ancient armchair that Voldemort must have been sitting in just a moment before, and Harry knew suddenly where they were.

Riddle Manor.

How strange, he thought listlessly. Voldemort was standing and surely

staring at him, and yet Harry remained focused on the armchair with its frayed fabric and worn wood. The last time Voldemort had been in that chair he was as small as an infant and hideously deformed. Harry had seen him in a dream, plotting to capture, use, and kill him to regain a new body…

The Dark Lord's magic began to twist in such a distracting and alarmed manner that Harry, finally, looked up. Voldemort's face was bloodless and pale. When Harry's eyes met his, he winced as though Harry had said something hurtful, and he looked away. As though Harry could ever hurt the Dark Lord.

Silence stretched between them, long and horribly uncomfortable. For Voldemort, anyway. Harry could sense the anguish in his magic as plainly as he could see it in his uncharacteristically distressed expression. Harry supposed he too would have felt… well, something, but he was still rather numb. He wondered if it was the effect of whatever spells or potions had been used to heal him, or if anyone would feel this way given what happened. He wasn't sure, but of all the things he wanted to know, his semi-mental fogginess was far down on the list.

He was curious as to who had healed him, though. Judging by the way Voldemort was standing in the corner, as far as he could possibly be from him in this large bedroom, magic wild with worried emotions, Harry could only assume it was not him. His eyes kept darting up to Harry's face and then away again, like he feared that his gaze alone might cause him to shatter.

No, Voldemort had gotten someone else to heal him… the source of that peaceful, pale yellow magic, almost certainly. Harry wondered who that had been, but again, it was not crucial information. There were other things, more important things.

Harry looked down at his palms, resting them face up on his lap. He remembered… he *remembered*.

He was strangely relieved as he recalled what happened to him; how he had kissed Ginny and then run, leaving her behind, pursued by shadows and snakes and the Dark Lord himself; how he had been magically stripped bare while that blissful magic consumed him and he had not wanted it and yet it was blissful and it was everything and he had felt *everything*—

Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath, shoving the memories

down. He was simply glad he had them. Voldemort surely could have modified his memory while he was unconscious. He could have erased that event from his mind; he could have made Harry forget about his moment with Ginny. He could have even obliterated the love he had for her if he'd wanted. Harry could have woken up, inexplicably, here or in Malfoy Manor or anywhere else, with no memory or some false memory of how the reception had gone, no longer having feelings for Ginny Weasley… and he would have been none the wiser. But he hadn't. For whatever reason, Voldemort hadn't modified Harry's memory, and for that, at least, Harry was grateful.

But why? And what about Ginny? And the reception? He had left in such a hurry, leaving her alone… What happened to her? Did Voldemort or one of his Death Eaters intercept? Was she okay? Had she made it back to the reception unscathed?

What did everyone think happened to him…?

Harry swallowed hard, preparing to ask, but then shut his mouth and changed his mind. Voldemort's magic had flashed brighter when it looked like Harry was about to speak, causing Harry to pause. When he looked back at Voldemort, it was to see that he was watching Harry with a torn expression. Voldemort looked away when their eyes met. He was like a ticking time bomb, Harry thought, and his anxiousness worried him. They were chaotic, those feelings. Unpredictable. His questions could wait until the Dark Lord was a little more stable.

As his magic continued to writhe, radiantly and in such a conflicting, glistening fashion, Harry realized what was so bizarre about it now. The emotion that was there among so many others, a sensation that Harry would not have thought possible for Lord Voldemort if he could not feel it himself.

Remorse.

Real, deep-seated remorse. Voldemort felt *bad* about what he had done. He *regretted* it. It was consuming him, intertwined in a cloud of fear, uncertainty, and anger that was directed at himself. Harry doubted he knew what to make of it all. He probably had no idea what it was he was feeling, as he had never felt such things before.

But Harry knew.

Harry, wide-eyed as he once more stared down at his empty palms, tried to process this. Remorse. The only thing that could, supposedly,

heal a fractured soul…

But could Voldemort be healed?

Harry was not sure, he had never been sure, but the longer he sat there, silent, the more Voldemort's magic shook with it. It trembled with remorse and worry and an angst that was swelling. Harry thought he understood. Voldemort was waiting for Harry to react in some way, to say something, and he was anticipating… anger.

Rightfully so, Harry thought, but he took his time as he weighed his options. He could react with rage. *Should*, probably. He could curse Voldemort's name and call him a monster and he would be right. Voldemort was a monster. He had done an unforgivable act, but that was, sadly, unsurprising. Lord Voldemort had committed countless unforgivable acts. Harry had known that something like this—Voldemort losing control—would eventually happen… but he hadn't known it would result in this. In the Dark Lord feeling the one thing Harry had always hoped he would.

It was simply a tragedy that it had taken such a monstrous act to get him to this point.

Yet as Harry sat there, knowing fully that he had every right to be furious, he set that anger aside. He was used to being the one to suffer so that others might not. He was the pig raised for the slaughter, wasn't he? What did he care if he had to undergo more pain, more abuse if it meant that others might suffer less? All things considered, this was not the worst thing Voldemort had done to him. He had killed his parents. He had killed or been responsible for the deaths of many people he cared about, people he loved. He had kidnapped him and tortured him and left him blind and alone for what felt like an eternity.

What was one more terrible sin to add to the list?

For this was a critical moment, Harry realized. Right now, Voldemort was teetering on the edge of some great emotional downpour. If Harry reacted in anger, the Dark Lord might respond in anger too, because what else did he know? He'd bury these feelings of remorse that were now swirling around his fractured soul, and Harry might effectively destroy this light, this admittedly unlikely but still present opportunity that could lead to Tom Riddle's salvation.

He doesn't deserve it, a small voice in Harry's head whispered angrily—the voice that always demanded retribution. *He doesn't deserve even the*

chance for healing. He deserves pain. You know this. He has killed too many, he has made too many suffer.

But that remorse…

He deserves to remain broken. He deserves to be worse. Shatter him. Break him even more than he has broken you. Look him in the eye and say it. Tell him that you told him so, that you knew it would come to this.

Tell him. Ruin him.

Harry clenched his fists, and Voldemort's magic reacted as he watched —gold and black glinting in the corner. It was tempting. Harry knew Voldemort deserved no forgiveness from him. He didn't even have the bravery to ask for it, to apologize. The Dark Lord was a silent and emotionally riddled spectator, waiting for Harry to speak first. He was a coward and a monster and if it had been someone else, anyone else that he had done this too, Harry would never allow such passiveness.

But it was him… and Harry would never love himself the way he loved others.

No, Harry had always and would always do whatever he could to protect his friends. And what he knew now was that, whether he liked it or not, Lord Voldemort was in power. He was the ruler of the Wizarding World, and he would be tomorrow, and the next day, and the next day…

What kind of ruler would Harry unleash? This moment could determine whether he created a self-hating, raging Dark Lord full of spiteful feelings he didn't understand—possibly the most dangerous and unpredictable version of Voldemort yet—or…

Harry wanted to say something, but the tension in the room felt too great for that. It was like the air was full of flammable, toxic gasses and a single word might be a match. He worried he might say the wrong thing in the wrong way. So, Harry did something else instead. He took another deep breath, looked up, and slowly, with an absurd amount of caution, lifted his open palm in the Dark Lord's direction. An offering of peace.

Come here, he thought.

Voldemort's reaction might have been comical if there was anything funny about the situation at all. His magic sharpened in surprise, and he looked at Harry's outstretched hand with raised brows and huge

eyes as though he thought Harry was absolutely insane. *He's probably not wrong,* Harry thought, his arm still extended.

Voldemort's gaze went to Harry's face again, where he managed to look him in the eyes for all of two seconds before once more shifting his focus elsewhere—to one side, towards the peeling, floral wallpaper. "I… am leaving," he finally said.

Harry dropped his arm back into his lap. He was unsure what he expected Voldemort to say or do in response to his gesture, but he had not expected that.

"Leaving?" Harry echoed. His voice was low and gravelly, like he hadn't spoken in days.

"Yes. Leaving."

Another long stretch of silence. When Voldemort's magic began to swell with angst again—the remorse still vibrantly clear—Harry asked, "Where? And… why?"

Voldemort did not look at him as he spoke. "Away from here," he answered vaguely. "Far away. There is something I must do."

Harry thought to ask what that something was, but he knew the Dark Lord would not tell him. "How long will you be gone?" he asked instead.

"I do not know. Perhaps a few days… perhaps much longer. I will not return until I have accomplished what I set out to do."

His aura darkened then, an emotion like despair clouding everything else. Harry knew why at once. How would Voldemort fare being apart from Harry for more than a few days…? When he was so utterly and hopelessly addicted to his soul…

Silence reigned once more, filling the bedroom with that toxic pressure. The fire crackled softly and Harry stared at the ancient armchair, where its tattered velvet seemed to deteriorate further right before his eyes.

It went on and on, the silence, and still Harry did not know what else to say. Voldemort's magic was full of longing and reluctant determination and *remorse*, and yet Harry sat there, unable to speak, afraid he might obliterate it all.

After what felt like hours, though it was probably only a few minutes, Voldemort shifted in the way he was standing. His magic filled with that dark determination, and Harry could tell he was on the precipice of leaving.

Wait.

Harry thought it as clearly as he could, once more offering his hand as though inviting him. He wasn't sure if Voldemort could hear his thoughts or not, but he looked at him when Harry moved, raising his arm.

Come here.

Conflict stormed Voldemort's aura. He clearly did not trust himself to be anywhere near Harry, and yet he wanted to be so badly. He may have been too proud and cowardly to ever apologize, but Harry could see that he wanted to make it right, that he regretted his actions deeply. In another world, one where Harry could not sense magical auras, Harry might have thought Voldemort's only regret was that he had nearly killed his last horcrux. But the reality, shocking as it was, was revealed in that glittering cloud of darkness. Voldemort felt real remorse, and it wasn't about him or the shard of his soul. It was about Harry.

Voldemort stayed where he was, frozen as he looked at Harry as though he were both the most alluring and repulsive creature. He supposed he was, to the Dark Lord. Harry could see the decision forming in his magic—darkening with regretful resolution. He was going to leave.

But Harry couldn't let the moment pass. If Voldemort was feeling true remorse for the first time in his life, Harry would do whatever he could to nurture it.

Doing so could save the world.

"Please."

Voldemort flinched again, his magic flashing. How much weight that word now carried. Just a few hours ago, Voldemort had longed to hear Harry say nothing else; to beg and beg, for anything, for everything…

Even now his aura showed his inner turmoil. That toxic longing was still there, triggered in an instant when Harry spoke the word—*please*

—followed immediately by self-loathing.

Then, to Harry's great surprise, Voldemort walked towards him. He moved slowly, with such caution that Harry might have thought he was made of glass and the Dark Lord caused earthquakes wherever he stepped. No sort of violence occurred, of course, and soon Voldemort was standing much closer to where Harry sat, though he left some distance between them. His eyes were stuck on Harry's hand; his magic writhed in yearning to reach out and take it and his obvious commitment to not do so and leave.

Harry lost whatever patience he had. Maybe he *was* insane, maybe he was just reckless. Either way, Harry made the decision for him. He reached out and grabbed the Dark Lord's hand. His magic twitched in shock at the action, brightening with something like fear, like regret, and he shook his head, starting to pull away—

Harry had never tried to tap into that buoyancy before himself. It had always been Voldemort who triggered it, not him. But he tried then. *Only a little.* It was easy; the light was born like a tiny flower blooming. Just the slightest warmth of magic thrummed between them at Harry's will.

The reaction was immediate. Voldemort melted at the sensation, subtle and sweet as it was, crumpling like a tower whose cornerstone had been removed. He literally fell, landing on the bed at Harry's side, gravitating towards him in his descent like Harry was the sun and he a man freezing from the cold. Whatever hesitation he'd had was swept away, and he sunk into the warmth of Harry's soul with new emotions scouring his psyche.

Relief. Shocked but beautiful relief; it cascaded over Voldemort's magic like a balm being placed on a festering wound. Voldemort had been deeply concerned that Harry would act out in anger—and how he would have reacted then, Harry did not want to know—and the fact that Harry was not was nothing short of astonishing to him.

Perhaps Harry should have been utterly alarmed at having Voldemort in a bed with him so soon after what happened. Probably would have been, if he wasn't still numbed and recovering. But that sensation of relief and remorse filling Voldemort's magic made it easy. He needed to nurture this. He would. Voldemort didn't deserve it, but he would.

It's okay, Harry thought. Voldemort's head fell onto his shoulder, his one hand still in Harry's.

It wasn't okay. Of course it wasn't.

It's okay.

Voldemort's magic shook with something Harry couldn't name. It was sad, whatever it was, and gone quickly enough. Everything slipped back into the loveliness of their bond, a sweet thrumming that Harry controlled, that Voldemort let passively rush over him.

They sat there like that for a long time. Without intending to do it, Harry curled his other arm around Voldemort's shoulders and started to run his fingers through his hair, just as Voldemort so enjoyed doing to him. He reacted in the same way that Harry imagined he usually did—by leaning into his touch, making Harry think bizarrely of a house cat. A thought flickered across Harry's mind, one so soft and low and buried that Harry nearly missed it.

I don't deserve this.

Harry didn't know how to respond to that. He didn't think Voldemort expected him to. He just concentrated on the warmth pulsing between them, focusing on nothing but that thought-annihilating light and the beauty of Voldemort's aura as it settled.

Time stretched on, distorted. The Dark Lord's head was heavy on his shoulder as Harry lazily played with his hair. He perceived Voldemort's magic, watching the way it became more and more relaxed. It started to act in ways he hadn't seen before, coiling in slow, repetitive patterns. Harry had never known it to be so peaceful. It was almost hypnotic, and made Harry feel sleepy…

Harry nearly jumped in surprise at that thought, and he was very grateful that he had not. He looked down, peering out of the corner of his eye at the Dark Lord's face.

He was asleep.

Voldemort's eyes were closed and his lips very slightly parted. There was no expression on his face, which was soft in ways that were unimaginable to Harry before. His magic coiled, gradual and full of serenity. Harry was astounded.

Lord Voldemort does not sleep, he had once said. But Harry had known then that it was not because he did not want to… it was because he couldn't.

Well, no wonder you're so fucking crazy, Harry thought, his lips twitching. *Just one missed night and I'm a way bigger arse… and you should see Ron without his beauty sleep, he's a menace…*

Voldemort's magic continued to move in slow cycles, unaffected. He was not just asleep, he was *out.*

Moving as slowly as he dared, Harry shifted, pulling Voldemort's body so that his head was no longer on his shoulder but instead in his lap. It was surprisingly easy to move him; even in his slumber Voldemort seemed to gravitate towards him, and Harry was able to place his head on his thigh with relative ease. He didn't wake at all.

Harry looked down at Voldemort's slumbering face in awe. He looked so much less fearsome asleep, when those blood-red eyes were concealed and his face was no longer tense. For the first time, Harry saw the traces of Tom Riddle there. Not the megalomaniac hell-bent on ruling the Wizarding World, but the child. The orphan boy who had snuck away into the woods, summoning autumn leaves and making them dance around him in utter, innocent delight.

Harry smiled. Voldemort may have liked to think that he owned Harry… but Harry was beginning to see things a little differently.

With this thought in mind, Harry closed his eyes, leaned back against the silky pillows, and lost himself in the alluring patterns of the Dark Lord's magic.

When Harry awoke next, he was alone.

His eyes fluttered open not to peeling wallpaper and a crackling fire, but to a mirror. His own sleepy reflection looked down at him, blinking once in a daze. He was back in Malfoy Manor, then… and while Voldemort was gone, there was something else there. He saw it in the silver of the mirror, right at his side.

Harry sat up. His invisibility cloak was beside him, folded neatly, and on top of it was a box. Harry recognized it. This wooden box had been presented to him at the Ministry when he had been asked, unfairly, to produce a Patronus. Harry picked it up and removed the lid.

Yew, thirteen and a half inches, a phoenix feather core. The wand that had devastated the Wizarding World with the darkest of magic. Harry picked it up, and the wood felt warm in his hands.

Sunshine-y Warm

Master Potter is to be knowing some things, sir.

Harry lifted his cup and slowly sipped at his tea. He was outside, sitting at one of the tables in the rose garden. Already the gazebo was back to its former state; the dance floor was gone and the decorations removed. One would have never guessed that just yesterday a wedding had taken place.

It was a sunny morning. Warm, pleasant. Harry was alone in the gardens, as he wanted to be. He'd had only had one conversation since he'd woken up.

Binny has been told to tells you, Master…

Master.

As though things weren't strange enough already, Harry found himself reflecting on that more than anything. Binny the house-elf, appearing in his room… and addressing him now as Master.

Of course, the rest of what Binny had told him was worthy of some reflection, too.

Harry took another long drink of tea. Songbirds chirped happily from the bushes and the trees. A breeze fluttered across the grounds, bringing with it the aroma of sweet flowers. The smell was so strong Harry was certain there was magic involved. *It isn't real*, he thought dully. *Just a charm or something to make them smell nicer than they are.* He drank more of his tea.

The truth and the lie that was being offered instead… Harry was coming to learn that there was little matter, anymore, which was real.

The lie that was being offered—that he had been told; that had already been distributed to the rest of the wizarding world—was that he had gone off with Ginny at the reception. That part, at least, as not a lie. A lot of people had seen that. But what everyone thought happened after that could not have been more different from the truth.

As far as the public knew, Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley had spent a pleasant night together, catching up, talking. They kissed. And then

Harry, allegedly, told Ginny that he did not think they should be together, as he had to stay at Malfoy Manor for an unforeseen amount of time. Rehabilitation, after all, would be much less complicated if he were alone and able to properly focus. Ginny, hurt but empathetic, said she understood and left. Harry, also no longer feeling like dancing, went to his room in the manor, quietly dismissing himself for the rest of the evening.

This was the story that everyone heard. This was the memory that Ginny Weasley had been fed, forced into her mind by a diligent Bellatrix Lestrange who had caught her before she could return to the reception, raising hell about Harry Potter running off into the woods like someone possessed. Harry's mind hadn't been tampered with, but Ginny's had. By Bellatrix Lestrange.

Gods, he hated that woman.

Harry wondered what of Ginny's memories from that night were still real. Did she remember, truly, the way his hand felt in hers as she led him away from the dance floor? Did she remember the way her eyes watered, how she smiled through her tears and even made a joke about them?

Did she remember the real kiss or a fabricated one?

No one knew the real story.

Master is t-to be saying this as wells…

Well, no one except Harry and Voldemort. No one else had any idea of what truly happened—not even Binny, who had been instructed to inform Harry of this latest public lie, nor Bellatrix, who had been an integral part of keeping it under wraps. Both of them simply did what their Master commanded them to do, no questions asked…

Master…

Harry ran his finger around the rim of his gilded teacup, tilting his face up towards the sun.

Master.

It was a small thing, surely, to be called Master by a house-elf, but it was also not so small at all. *Was* Harry Binny's master? Could he now command the tiny elf to do something, and if it did not conflict with a previous order, he would do it? Harry was not sure. He had not yet

asked Binny to do anything he would not already be willing to do.

Harry let out a sigh and finished most of the last of his drink. Unsure of why he was doing it even as he did it, he swirled the small amount of liquid that was left, tossed what remained, and turned his cup three times. The largest cluster of leaves against the porcelain looked a bit like a bear, he thought. And another small section near it looked like some kind of bird. A sparrow, maybe? A starling? What did *that* mean?

He didn't know. *Guess it doesn't really matter,* Harry thought. He set the cup down and closed his eyes, basking in the morning sun and inhaling the scent of enchanted flowers.

It's all a bunch of bullshit, anyway.

He felt her presence then—a soothing navy. Cautious. Harry pretended not to notice with his eyes still closed and head tilted back.

"Harry?"

He turned to face Narcissa, who approached him with a small smile. "I hope I'm not interrupting," she said.

"Not at all." Harry thought it odd to be speaking to her so calmly—as though the most dramatic thing that had occurred last night was his supposed rejection of Ginevra Weasley. "Just enjoying the sunshine."

"May I join you?"

Harry had been enjoying the solitude, but he knew it would be remiss of him to not allow Narcissa Malfoy to sit with him at her own table, in her own rose garden. "Of course," he said, and she took a seat beside him.

Binny appeared. "Would Mistress like some tea and some biscuits, perhaps?" he asked.

"More tea," said Narcissa.

"Anything else for Master Potter?"

Narcissa's face remained pleasant, but her magic surged with a slight amount of shock at her house-elf's words.

Master.

Master.

“Sure, more tea would be lovely. Thank you, Binny.”

The elf bowed low, and then he disappeared with Harry’s empty teacup and its empty prophecy.

“Did you sleep well?” Narcissa asked.

Harry nodded. When he said nothing, she went on. “I’m sorry that you didn’t get to enjoy the reception for very long. I understand why you would want to dismiss yourself, of course…”

Yes, it would be perfectly logical to want to leave the party after re-breaking up with one’s not-actually girlfriend, Harry thought to himself. He wasn’t even sure why he was maintaining Voldemort’s lies anymore. Was he doing so out of sheer habit at this point?

No, that small, infuriating voice of reason from the back of his mind piped up. *You’re doing it for the same reason you do anything. Because you know that telling the truth could result in unforeseeable catastrophe. Because Lord Voldemort would never admit he ever did anything wrong, ever… and really, who would believe you even if you did tell the truth?*

Harry took a deep breath. That was all accurate, of course, but there was another reason he was playing along with the web of the Dark Lord’s public deceptions. A much bigger one.

The truth was that Harry didn’t *want* everyone to know the truth.

“Yeah,” he said. Narcissa’s magic trembled with empathy, but it was all wrong.

She had no idea.

Pop!

Binny appeared and floated their teacups to them. He then bowed low, disappearing without another word.

“Well,” said Narcissa as she raised her cup, “I have some good news and some bad news.”

Harry raised a brow at her. “I’m listening,” he said when she did not immediately continue.

“It’s not really that bad, but… well, the Dark Lord decided just this

morning to alleviate Ronald Weasley's duties to the Ministry for a few weeks," she said. "He's not been fully pardoned by any means, it's only temporary, and he still isn't allowed his wand, but… well, he's been given leave to travel. With his new wife. They were both given a rather generous gift."

Harry stared, uncomprehending. "They are on their honeymoon as we speak," she finished. "They left early this morning… You were still sleeping."

Harry was in shock. "This morning?" he balked. "And… and they couldn't wake me up to say goodbye?"

"I am so sorry." Narcissa's magic bubbled with emotion. "But I—we—Bella said we were instructed not to wake you, that the Dark Lord forbade anyone bother you for any reason—and I… we…"

Her voice trailed off drearily. "They wanted to speak with you," she finished.

Harry frowned, trying to process what this meant. Was he angry? Sort of. He was more confused than anything. Why would Voldemort suddenly give Hermione and Ron a long vacation and have them leave immediately?

He doesn't want them around you right now, said that perceptive voice.

But why? They're my best friends; they are the ones I actually want *to be around… I think…*

Which was a point of concern for Harry. *Did* he want to be around Hermione and Ron at the moment? When he had woken up, all he'd wanted was to avoid them and everyone else, to be alone. Now that he was being told they were gone, he was suddenly very disheartened that their company was no longer an option.

Because he's afraid of your closeness with them, the voice reasoned. *He thinks that if you were to confide the truth in anyone, it would be Ron and Hermione. So he sent them away while* he's *away.*

A different voice, a memory of his own shaky, spoken tenor sounded in Harry's mind then:

'You're the one who is weak! You will never know love or friendship… and I feel sorry for you.'

Harry imagined some of the rare moments where he and the Dark Lord came face to face, and what had led to those moments. Harry in the hall with the Mirror of Erised, all because of what Hermione and Ron had sacrificed to get him there. Hearing of Harry in the Chamber of Secrets, but only because Hermione had become petrified for a clue and Ron had gone with him most of the way. Harry in the graveyard, making it to that final round because of the training he'd done with his friends. Harry in the Department of Mysteries with a flock of willing Hogwarts students ready to die to fight the Dark Lord with him. A flighty and fearful moment when Nagini had failed to hold him and Harry Potter had escaped with one of his two disguised companions to flee into the night…

Harry had always had friends alongside him up to the moment of those confrontations. Most notably, Hermione and Ron.

He fears true friendship, the voice concluded. *More than that, he fears* you *having true friendships.*

Harry drew in another deep breath, taking in the fake-flower aroma and feeling sickened by it. "Well," he said at length, "at least they get to go on a honeymoon. I'm glad that they do… Where are they, by the way?"

"Paris," Narcissa said.

Harry snorted without meaning to. Narcissa smirked as well. "Too cliché for your tastes?" she asked, her magic brightening.

"A bit," he said. Then, in an attempt to shift the topic away from himself, he asked, "Where did you and Lucius go on your honeymoon?"

Narcissa looked down at her teacup when she answered in a mumble. "…Paris."

Harry laughed.

"Anyway," Narcissa said, cutting into his laughter but smiling anyway, "I said I had good news as well, didn't I?"

"So you did."

"It's something you need to be shown rather than told about. And it's the reason I was so sad you left the reception as early as you did… But let's enjoy this beautiful weather and finish our tea, and then you'll

find out. If you're feeling up for a bit of a trip, of course."

Harry considered this. Was he up for a bit of a trip? He felt rather inclined to be lethargic all day, sitting in the sunshine and trying not to think about anything. He doubted that whatever 'good news' she had would do much to improve his mindset.

But the eager expression on Narcissa's face made him decide otherwise. "Of course," he said, and she beamed. "I'd love to."

They slowly drank their tea and listened to the birdsong. Harry closed his eyes and tried not to think about the fact that Hermione and Ron would be gone for a week, that he had to pretend to be fine when he wasn't, and that the wand that had given him this cursed destiny was currently stowed in the inner front pocket of his robes, resting against his heart.

It turned out that even Narcissa's kindness had limits.

Yes, she was wonderfully sweet to him. Yes, she cared for him in ways that rivaled the way she cared for her own son. But it turned out that this 'little trip' was not one she was willing to take him on herself.

"I'll expect you to be back by dinner time. You keep a close eye on him, Draco," she said, waving them on as they stood before the fireplace.

"Of course, mother."

Draco could not have looked more displeased.

It was comical for Harry to think about the arguments that must have ensued before this moment. Wherever Draco had been told to take Harry today, it was obvious that, bitterly resigned though he now was, he did *not* want to go. Neither did Narcissa, clearly, which was why she was smiling so brightly as she bid them farewell.

Harry was actually starting to get excited with all the suspense. Surely if it was somewhere Draco despised then he, Harry, would love it. He wasn't given much of a hint when Narcissa tossed powder into the Floo either—she merely called out, "The Outpost!", and the flames turned green.

"After you," Draco muttered, giving him a strained smile. Harry shrugged and stepped into the fire.

He emerged a moment later in a small, dark place, almost pitch black once the green flames disappeared. The scent of cedar hit him, and an instant feeling of nostalgia accompanied it. The only light came from sunlight which trickled in between the wooden boards. It was like a tiny, unlit cabin with nothing but a single door and a fireplace.

That same fireplace erupted behind him a moment later, and Draco walked right into him. “Oof! What are you still doing in here, Potter? Walk outside already, will you?”

“Where are we?” Harry asked, moving towards the door that was a mere foot in front of him. The green flames once more vanished, leaving them in semi-darkness.

“If you go outside, you’ll see.”

A bit warily, Harry did. The moment the door swung open and he stepped onto the grass, Harry grinned so widely it hurt his face.

“We’re at Hogwarts!”

They were; Harry and Draco had just arrived on the Hogwarts’ grounds. They walked out of what must have been a new addition to the school’s architecture—what appeared to be a small shack dedicated solely to a floo connection. The greenhouses were not far off, and over a slightly sloping hill, neither was the castle. It looked odd, Harry thought, in the summertime. There were no lights flickering from the windows; no students milling about the grounds or lazing by the lake.

Stranger by far was the state it was in. Hogwarts was still in disrepair; Harry could see the damage from across the grounds. Some crumbled walls. Piles of wreckage near the gates. The evidence of a bloody battle once fought, still present.

“Brilliantly deduced,” Draco muttered. Harry started to head towards the castle automatically, but then he said, “Wrong way, Potter.”

Harry turned. “Sorry?”

“We’re going this way.”

Draco jabbed a finger towards the forest, not the castle, and as Harry’s gaze lingered on the trees he began to think of the last time he had been here, walking alone, the ring in his hand, surrounded by phantoms and making his way towards what was surely his Death—

“Well?”

Draco’s colorless aura bristled with impatience. “Come on already. Let’s get this over with. Or do you not want to see the giant oaf?”

He gestured to his right, and Harry tore his focus away from the forest to look where he now pointed. “No,” he gasped, but then smiled broadly. When he focused on it—really focused—he could sense it. A magical aura that was dark, earthy… but also yellow? A magical aura, for sure. “Really?” he said. “Really!”

He didn’t wait for Draco to respond, though Harry was sure he’d grumbled something. Harry ran, tearing across the grounds.

“Hagrid!”

Harry’s voice was instantly hoarse when he shouted, but it carried all the same. Barking was the first response he got—Fang’s bellowing howls and the sound of him jumping on the door. Harry laughed and ran and already he felt winded—Gods, he was in horrible shape, wasn’t he?—but still he moved as quickly as he could. He made it to the steps just as the door opened, and he didn’t have a chance to avoid the collision that knocked him flat on his back in the grass.

“Fang! FANG! Gerrof, yeh stupid—”

Harry couldn’t hear whatever Hagrid said after that; Fang let out a whimpering howl right in his ear that Harry supposed meant he missed him. “Ow—Fang, hi—*eck!”*

Harry’s words were cut off when Fang assaulted him with a long swipe of his tongue. He was just glad he’d closed his mouth in time to avoid a sloppy, unwanted kiss.

“Geroff I said!” Hagrid bellowed, but of course Fang didn’t heed him. A moment later and the dog was physically lifted from Harry’s body, held back by a grinning, massive, disheveled, and familiar smiling half-giant.

Harry grinned back from where he laid on the ground, still sprawled on his backside—but he couldn’t form words. He was panting and breathless and there was Hagrid, Hagrid! And his magic was exactly what Harry might have imagined it to be—a shifting brown-gray and strong, like a boulder or a mountain.

After shoving Fang back inside and slamming the door shut, Hagrid

turned around, and threw his arms out and came at him with no hesitation. Harry had only just managed to get to his feet when he was swept off them again—this time in a near bone-crushing hug.

If Harry had thought Fang's howling was loud, it was nothing compared to the wailing of Hagrid.

He was a blubbering mess the moment he scooped up Harry Potter, hugging him too tightly and swinging him about in his massive arms. Harry was just as crushed by his magic, which swarmed around him like mountainous, overbearing walls.

"YER ALIVE!" were the first tangible words that Hagrid managed to shout through his wailing. He finally set Harry down again, though he kept his massive hands on Harry's shoulders.

He didn't seem to notice Harry's vibrant red eyes or lack of glasses at all.

"So are you!" Harry shouted back. There was a beat of silence as they stared at each other in disbelief, then they both laughed. Fang, who had been barking and jumping on the door from within Hagrid's hut, must have found a way to bust it open, because he joined them a moment later, leaping and barking and running around them in too-excited circles. Harry was just glad the dog wasn't inclined to knock him down again.

Instead, Fang had decided upon another target. "Hey! Back off!" Draco shouted. Hagrid and Harry turned to watch in amusement as Draco ran away, dodging a bounding and happy Fang. "Call your dog off! *Call him off!*"

Hagrid did no such thing. "I can' believe yer here," he said, ignoring Draco as he grinned at Harry.

"I can't believe you're here," Harry once more echoed.

They laughed again. "I mean it!" Draco roared, his magic sharpening. He whipped out his wand, and it was only then that Fang halted, backing away and whining when he pointed it threateningly. Harry's hand went instinctively to his chest, feeling the yew that was concealed beneath, wondering if he should draw it.

He didn't.

"Yeh can put that away, Malfoy," Hagrid grumbled. His own magic

darkened, like a shadow falling across a rocky valley. “Com’ere, Fang.”

Fang bowed his head and rushed to Hagrid’s side. “It’s all right Fang,” Harry said, patting him on the head. “You can’t win that one over. Malfoy doesn’t like anyone or anything decent.”

“Sorry I don’t want to be covered in dog hair and slobber like yourself,” Draco said, pocketing his wand and straightening his robes. Harry looked down; he was, indeed, covered in fur and an unfortunate amount of slobber. “I’ll be on my way, then. Have a lovely chat… or whatever it is you do.”

Malfoy turned to leave, heading back towards the tiny shack they had just come from. “You’re leaving?” Harry said. He had promised Narcissa that he would keep a close eye on him…

Draco turned, one eyebrow raised. “Do you *want* me to stay, Potter? I can’t imagine that you do, and trust me when I say there are few places I would like to be less than here, witnessing this little reunion.” He waved his hand flippantly towards him and Hagrid. “I’ll come back right before dinner time, and we can head back to my manor together with no one being any the wiser that I didn’t waste my afternoon here. It’s the least amount of suffering for everyone involved, wouldn’t you agree?”

Harry and Hagrid shared a look. “Er. Yeah,” Harry said. “Agreed.”

Malfoy turned without further comment, making his way to the Outpost. The door closed behind him and a moment later green light glowed from between the cracks. Then he was gone, off doing whatever it was Draco Malfoy liked to do when he was disobeying his mother.

“He’s a right arse, tha’ Malfoy,” Hagrid muttered.

“Yeah,” Harry said, nodding. “He’s the worst.”

“I don’t know about the *worst*.”

An unexpected voice came from behind. Harry whirled on the spot, nearly tripping over Fang when he did.

There, standing in the open doorway to Hagrid’s hut, was none other than Luna Lovegood. She smiled and waved, like seeing Harry Potter now was no more extraordinary than when she had seen him in the

hall between classes. Her presence explained the yellow that Harry had sensed earlier, too. Unlike the toxic, nauseating yellow aura of Umbridge, Luna's was soft and gentle. Like a sunflower.

"Hi Harry," she said nonchalantly.

"Luna!" Harry exclaimed. "What are you—how—why…?"

There were too many questions to get out at once. Hagrid chuckled beside him. "Luna here's been helpin' me since I got back," he explained. "Gettin' me and meh hut back inter shape, helpin' ter feed the thestrals… tha' sorta thin'. Has been helpin' me here and there fer years now, as a matter 'o fact."

He smiled at her fondly. When Harry looked confused, he laughed. "What? Yeh three aren' the only ones who came to visit me on occasion, yeh know."

Harry shook his head and smiled. "I'm glad," he said, turning to face Luna again. He rushed up the steps to meet her, then paused. "Oh, sorry—I'd hug you, but I'm covered in Fang fur and… grossness."

"It's okay," Luna said brightly. "The saliva of canines brings good fortune, you know. Especially when it's smeared over your heart like that. You should make a wish!"

Harry wasn't sure if she was joking or not, but decided it didn't matter. "I've missed you," he said, then pulled her into a hug. Her magic, sunshine-y warm and with a slightly floral note, swelled with happiness. Hagrid chuckled from behind and Fang, no longer upset by Draco's hostility, howled in delight.

And it was all very, very real.

Hagrid's Tale

Time had changed many things, but it had not changed Hagrid's cooking.

Harry found the inedibility of the rock cakes somewhat endearing, an unnecessary warmth accompanying the way they hurt his jaw when he tried to chew them. Across from him, Luna was wisely avoiding the round, heavy cakes and was instead sipping on her tea. Fang, who had finally calmed down enough to stay still, was laying at Harry's feet, drooling onto his shoes and staring up at him with wide, pleading eyes.

"I don't think you'd appreciate this, Fang," Harry said quietly as he held a chunk of rock cake aloft, keeping his voice low. Hagrid was on the other side of his semi-repaired hut, making more tea. "I can barely eat them myself."

Fang whimpered like he didn't agree.

"More tea, Harry?" Hagrid said as he turned towards the table where Harry and Luna sat.

"Please."

Hagrid refilled his cup and set the kettle back on the stove. He then made a cup for himself and took a seat on the oversized armchair in the corner. His magic settled around him like many tall, sturdy mountains.

"So," he began in a would-be casual tone, "…had better summers then, have yeh?"

Harry almost choked on his rock cake—which he had already been perilously close to doing. "Yeah," he agreed. "Yeah, I have."

Hagrid gave him a melancholy smile.

Having finally run out of patience, and now that the pleasantries were done (Hagrid had insisted that Harry eat something because he looked *skinnier 'n a broomstick!),* Harry decided that enough was enough. He had allowed Hagrid to make tea and feed him and now that this valiant attempt at normalcy was over, he said, "Hagrid… What *happened* to you after…?"

Harry had many questions, but he thought this one—trailing off and vague though it was—was enough.

Hagrid's aura dimmed. Luna gave him an encouraging smile, giving Harry the impression that she had heard this story in full already.

"Well," Hagrid started, a bit begrudgingly, "I thought… I thought they we gonna kill yeh, Harry. I really did."

Harry wasn't surprised. He could recall it so clearly, being surrounded by Death Eaters and darkness in the Forbidden Forest. Hagrid had been there, constrained and silenced…

"I saw him go 'round and say somethin' to yeh and then he hit yeh with some curse and yeh went down, 'n I tried ter get ter yeh, I did, an'—"

"Hagrid, I know," Harry said, cutting off what he was sure was about to be a long, rambling apology. "I know. Tell me what happened, please. To you."

Hagrid's stony magic fluctuated but he carried on. "I, er… well, ter be honest, Harry, it's a bit 'o a blur ter me. Because—what's 'er name? Lucius Malfoy's wife. The blonde tha' always lookin' so angry."

"Narcissa."

"Righ'… Narcissa. You went down an' Narcissa Malfoy took you away, apparating with yeh to somewhere more fittin' to kill yeh, or so I thought. An' I got mad when tha' happened. Real mad."

Harry's brows raised as Hagrid's magic rumbled and rose, clearly getting angry just thinking about it. It was in great contrast to Luna's calm aura, who was petting Fang, as he had shifted from Harry's feet to her lap instead.

"Mad enough to break some magical bonds?" Harry asked lightly.

"Not righ' away, but yeah," Hagrid said. "Firs' they marched me down with 'em, like some kind o' slave hostage, an' when we got ter Hogwarts where the fighting was he made this—this announcement, sayin' that yeh had taken off, had run like a coward—and tha' was when I really lost it, Harry."

"He called him a bloody liar and charged at the Dark Lord himself," Luna said nonchalantly. She offered Fang a small bit of a rock cake,

who sniffed it questionably. “The fighting got quite gruesome after that.”

Hagrid nodded.

“You’re lucky you weren’t killed,” Harry said, partially shocked that Hagrid would think to wandlessly charge at the Dark Lord, but mostly impressed.

“He’s lucky *he* wasn’t killed,” Hagrid muttered defiantly. “’Course, any of us tha' survived were lucky. It was chaos after tha’. I ran at ‘em and he threw some curse that I managed to dodge and thankfully Kingsley came to help but by then another dozen er so Death Eaters were on us, an’ tha’ was when the retreat was called. We were lost, there was no denyin’ it. The Order started ter gather the students ‘n others who were fightin’ on our side and headin’ for the hills.”

“That was how I got away,” Luna chimed in again. “Charlie Weasley shielded me and Cho and got the two of us to safety. He was very brave.”

“You didn’t retreat, Hagird?” Harry asked. He was glad to hear that Cho was alive, but was not necessarily in the mood to pursue the topic of his ex-girlfriend.

“Couldn‘a done,” Hagrid said. “I had ter… I had ter stay fer… ‘cause he was too big and slow ter to just run, and he couldn’ focus to do tha’ anyway, yeh see, wouldn’ listen…”

Hagrid’s beady, black eyes started to water, and his magic crumbled around him.

“Oh, God,” Harry said, the realization dawning on him. “Did… did Grawp…?”

Hagrid shook his bushy head. Fang whined, leaving Luna’s lap to lay his head on Hagrid’s knee instead.

“Hagrid,” Harry said. “I’m so sorry, I—”

“Died a warrior’s death, he did,” Hagrid said, cutting Harry off and carrying on. He spoke suddenly much louder, like if he shouted the words he could stifle his sorrow. “He ran, yeh see, but not *from* any ‘o them damn Death Eaters. He was chasin' one down. It was Crabbe, who had been fightin’ Grawp by his bloody self, if yeh can believe it. Grawp chased ‘em clear off the grounds. I went after ‘em too, ‘o

course, tryin' ter get him ter stop, but nothin' I shouted or did got through to 'em. Crabbe kept firin' curses back at us but none of 'em hurt Grawpy at all. 'Course, soon as we got outside the bounds, Crabbe summoned help. A bunch 'o those snatcher arses showed up—an'… an… tha' many of 'em were distraction enough fer one of 'em to get the curse in tha' not even bein' a giant can save yeh from."

Harry tried to envision it—Grawp and Hagrid, fighting a bunch of Snatchers and Death Eaters with no wands, no help. Only their giant blood to aid them in an impossible fight.

"An' tha' one was Crabbe," Hagrid said darkly. "I didn' know it at the time, but now I see things differently. He was fightin' wildly, Crabbe was, like a deranged man. I thought he was just mad with bloodlust; that *tha'* was why he was fightin' a giant all on his own. But then I learned he lost his son in a freak bout 'o fiendfyre earlier in the fightin'… he wasn' mad. He was a man with a death wish."

Harry swallowed hard. *A freak bout of fiendfyre.* Draco's voice rang in the back of his mind, high and cold and full of tragic realization.

…*C-Crabbe…C-Crabbe…*

And then Ron's harsh response:

He's dead.

"But I didn' know tha' at the time," Hagrid continued. "Don' think I woulda cared much either way. He killed my brother. I was gonna kill him, too."

Harry's eye went wide. "Did you?"

"I did," Hagrid said bluntly. "Wasn' pretty, either. An' I woulda taken the rest of 'em down, too, if I coulda. I had jus' grabbed one 'o those bastards when they disapparated, draggin' me along with 'em. As yeh might imagine, I'm not exactly easy to apparate with. I'm just lucky tha' he was the one who splinched, somehow, an' not me."

"How did he splinch?"

"Left an arm behind," Hagrid said unemotionally. "Made 'em easier to take down, tha' did."

Harry's eyes fell down to his lap, unsure what to say. He did not how to feel about a Hagrid who killed with such ease… even if it was

justified.

“I’m not proud of it,” Hagrid said, like he knew exactly what Harry was thinking. “I didn’ even know what I was doin’ when I did it. I only knew tha’ Grawp was gone an’ somehow it seemed like more violence would make it righ’. Never does, ‘o course…”

Harry could only nod at that, for he also knew that feeling well. After Sirius had died, he had tried to torture Bellatrix Lestrange (for simply killing had not felt like enough), and had damn near destroyed Dumbledore’s office.

“What happened after that?” Harry asked after an uncomfortable pause.

“Well, I had no idea where I was, as a damn snatcher had taken me ter Merlin knew where. Some forest in the middle ‘o nowhere. I didn’ have what was left ‘o my wand anymore, and I was alone out there. An’ I never learned how to apparate properly mehself. So I walked. Felt like I was in a daze. Bloody rage like tha’ only lasts so long, yeh know… Soon it felt like I wasn’ even alive anymore, like I was a shell of mehself. I’d lost Grawp and I thought I’d lost yeh too, Harry. I figured then tha’ I’d lost everyone.

“Dunno how long I was out there ter be honest. Not tha’ livin in the wilderness if hard for meh, but not knowin’ anything sure was. I kept tryin’ to find things out, but I can’ get close at all ter towns ‘cause they’re crawling with muggles an’ I draw a fair amount ‘o attention. Musta been at least a week that I was out there. Too long with no news and no hope. Yeh know what I eventually did, Harry? Yeh know what this crazy ‘ol fool did?”

Harry shook his head. Fang nudged Hagrid’s hand, which had been resting on his thigh, and Hagrid began to pet him subconsciously as he spoke.

“I broke the Taboo on purpose. Said ‘is name.”

Harry gaped surprise. He remembered vividly how fearful Hagrid had been when he, Harry, as an eleven-year-old boy, had asked Hagrid to tell him the Dark Lord’s name. He hadn’t been able to do it without shuddering.

“So… you turned yourself in, essentially,” said Harry.

Hagrid nodded. “I did. Didn’ know there was anythin’ left ter fight for

when I was out there in the middle of bloody nowhere. So I figured, migh' as well take down a few more Snatchers on meh way out if I could. But it wasn't jus' some regular 'ol Snatchers who showed up tha' time."

Harry expected him to say that more real Death Eaters had come, or maybe Fenrir Greyback, but he was wrong.

"You-know-who showed up 'imself," said Hagrid, soundly somehow both proud and bitter.

"Did he really?"

"Sure did. An' maybe some people wouldn' known who he was, 'cause he didn' look at all like he had before, all snake-like an' monstrous, but I did. Oh, *did* I."

Harry was sure that Hagrid immediately recognized the Dark Lord in his new and improved body. While he still had the red eyes and was not as youthful as the version Harry had seen in the diary, this Dark Lord was undeniably Tom Marvolo Riddle. The man who was once the boy who had somehow gotten everyone to believe that it was Hagrid's pet that had killed Myrtle, not the basilisk.

That had, put simply, ruined Hagrid's life.

"Tha' rage came *rearing* back then!" Hagrid said loudly, even managing to laugh a bit. It was a toxic sound; Fang pulled away and went back to Luna. "I didn' know how he'd managed to regain a better body an' I didn' care ter ask—I just attacked, again, knowin' tha' this was the end. But at least I was goin' ter go down in the books as one 'o the Order members who had ter be killed by the Dark Lord 'imself. Tha' gave me some comfort."

"But that didn't happen," Harry said astutely.

"Nah," Hagrid agreed. "Sure didn't."

Harry racked his brains, trying to fit this event into the timeline that was his mess of a life. If he had regained a new body by the time he had found Hagrid, then that meant that he, Harry, had already attempted to off himself…

Which was right around the time that Voldemort had come to some unhappy realizations on his part—that he couldn't keep killing Harry's friends, or he would lose Harry, too.

“He seemed real intent on keeping meh alive, fer some reason,” Hagrid said, “even goin’ so far as ter tell the Snatchers and other wizards tha’ were there not ter aim to kill. I managed to knock a few out at least—I think did some real damage to one bloke—but then it was over. I don’ remember being hit but I guess no one does where they’re knocked unconscious by half ‘o dozen stunnin’ spells.

“I woke up in a bloody cell. Was stuck there fer days, wastin’ away while I wondered what in the hell was goin’ on. Thought tha’ was it—I was goin’ ter be put on trial, eventually, called a traitor and given the kiss. But I was only in there fer a few days before you-know-who once more graced me with ‘is presence. Bastard.”

“What did he say to you?” Harry asked, deeply curious.

“Told meh what was happenin’ with the world, which was *mighty* nice of ‘im,” Hagrid said, his voice such a sarcastic drawl it might have given Draco a run for his money. “Told meh how ‘e had won, how the wizard world was ‘is now an’ how I would be spared if I pledged *fealty* to ‘is new bloody regime… As though tha’ would ever happen. I laughed in ‘is face, told ‘im where to stick his new regime. Then he said that yeh were alive.”

“He did?”

“Yeah. Said he’d give me some time to ‘reconsider my choices’ ‘fore he left. An’ I gotta say, Harry, I didn’ really believe it. I didn’ think there was any way yeh could be alive, not if he was runnin’ things. So when he came back a few days later, I said no thanks… in a much more colorful way, mind.”

His magic, which had been so heavy with sadness before, brightened a little at the thought. “And he still let you out?” Harry asked, despite knowing the answer.

“Not righ’ away. I dunno why, Harry, but he was hellbent on keepin’ me alive. Said he had plans and tha’ I was a part of 'em, whether I liked it or not. When I said he was a lying arse, tha’ I wasn’ so stupid as to think yeh were really alive, he… he showed me a memory. It was the weirdest thing I’d ever seen. Felt? It was bloody odd.”

Harry sipped at his tea again, trying to hide his uncertain expression while he processed this. The Dark Lord had given Hagrid a memory…?

“What’d he show you?”

“Showed me a memory of… well, of *you*, Harry.”

Harry’s stomach dropped. “*What* memory of me?”

“You, with red eyes and no glasses but definitely you, with Hermione and Ron. In Malfoy Manor of all the places! It was only a few seconds long, mind, but it was definitely a memory ‘o the three of you, recent, together as usual… guess not even losin’ a war could keep yeh apart.”

Harry’s lips almost pulled into a smile, but then it fell. “They’re actually gone now,” Harry said. “Er, on their honeymoon. For a week, in Paris. Not *gone* gone.”

“That’s lovely,” Luna said dreamily. She was scratching behind Fang’s ear, who was enjoying her attention. “I’ve always wanted to go to Paris.”

“Yeah, they’re married now,” Hagrid said, and his magic became oddly wobbly with emotion. “Married! Of all the nonsense tha’s ‘appened in the past few months, tha’ might make the top ‘o the list.”

“You heard that they got married?”

“’O Course. I was at the weddin’!”

“You were!?” Harry exclaimed. *How* had he missed Hagrid?

“I was! Got to the reception a bit late, though. Still, I thought I’d be seein’ yeh there! Was guaranteed it, in fact. But then I heard wha’ happened there, too…”

He gave Harry a knowing look, but Harry knew he had been fed the same lie as everyone else. Still, his mind raced, trying to quickly put together what this all meant.

Voldemort had found and captured Hagrid a long time ago—relatively speaking. And he had kept him locked up but alive and had him attend the wedding and suddenly all those sly, little comments Voldemort had been making up until the day of the wedding held a lot more weight.

I have big *plans…*

A huge *secret…*

What a giant *surprise it will be…*

“That absolute dick,” Harry muttered softly, the words escaping his mouth before he could stop them. He'd had Hagrid locked up, alive and well, and he had kept it from Harry for so long!

Hagrid let out a bark of a laugh and his stony magic brightened. “Tha’ he is,” he agreed.

Yet there was something else about the timing of things that had caught Harry by surprise. When he had first seen Hagrid, he'd thought that maybe this was something the Dark Lord had planned after the reception; that this was a… well, an apology of sorts, for what he had done. But if he had been planning this for weeks already, if Hagrid was *at* the reception that Harry was supposed to have stayed for, this could not possibly be the case.

There was something significant there, Harry knew it. The fact that the Dark Lord had *already* been planning on reuniting him with Hagrid… and not only because of what happened that night.

“But… so wait,” Harry said, “if you were at the wedding, then does that mean you’re totally pardoned?”

“Yep,” Hagrid said, not sounding that thrilled about it. “A free man.”

“And he let you come live at Hogwarts again?”

“Gave me back meh old position of Gamekeeper.”

“But not your teaching position,” Harry concluded easily enough.

Hagrid shook his head. “Said I wasn’ properly qualified.”

Harry was on his feet in a flash. “Not qualified!” he roared. “The only reason you’re not qualified—on paper, anyway—is because of him! Him and his—the fact that *he*—it was *his* stupid pet that killed Myrtle! Not yours!”

“I know,” Hagrid said, sounding somehow much calmer now in response to Harry’s rage. “I know.”

“The basilisk, right?” said Luna conversationally. “It’s so odd, don’t you think? That everyone believed it was a giant spider that did it… even Myrtle herself said she saw a big pair of yellow eyes, and then she dropped dead. It really shouldn’t have been difficult to figure out that it was a basilisk. Acromantula don’t have yellow eyes. And they would probably eat their victims, not petrify them, don’t you think?”

There was a stretch of silence following her words. Harry and Hagrid looked at one another, each considering the truth of this. Luna went back to petting Fang.

"…He can't do this," Harry eventually muttered, defiant.

"I'm jus' glad ter be out of Azkaban, ter be honest," Hagrid said. "I dunno how Sirius managed ter last fer so long while he was there… Guess tha's the difference; havin' somethin' to hold on to versus thinkin' tha' there's nothin' left… Before 'e told me yeh and Hermione and Ron were still alive, I don' think I woulda lasted long at all…"

Dread pooled in Harry's gut. "Azkaban?" he breathed. "You were in Azkaban?"

Hagrid nodded and shuddered. A colossal wave of guilt swept over Harry. "McGonagall," he said. "I can't believe—I can't believe I forgot, I have to get her out, I… I…"

Harry's heart began to pound. His forehead broke out in a cold sweat and his stomach coiled in knots; he feared he might be sick.

"Perhaps we should get some fresh air?"

Magic, warm and sweet, washed over him. Luna was at his side, touching his shoulder. It was amazing how it affected him—one moment Harry was on the verge of another panic attack, and the next he was basking in the pleasant aura of sunflowers and sunshine that was Luna Lovegood.

"I can show you what Hagrid and I have been working on," she said happily.

"I… yeah," Harry said, shaking his head and the turmoil away. "Fresh air sounds like a good idea."

Hagrid moved as though he too was going to come with, but Luna shook her head. "I think maybe just us," she said. "Sometimes it's nice to get away from authority figures."

"I'm no authority figure!" Hagrid boomed… rather authoritatively.

"You'll always be a Professor in our eyes, sir," Luna responded cheekily.

Hagrid couldn't help but smile at that, but he still looked

unconvinced. “I don’ like yeh bein’ out there alone,” he said.

“I go out to the forest alone all the time. I know all the places not to go. Besides, I have my wand. And I had a great teacher for defensive magic.”

She smirked at Harry, whose heart swelled with pride.

Hagrid looked back and forth between the two of them and sighed defeatedly, falling back into his armchair. “Take Fang with yeh,” he said.

Fang didn’t need to be convinced—he sprung up the moment he heard his name and rushed over to where Luna and Harry stood. “Very well,” said Luna. “Let’s go then, shall we?”

Smiling, Harry followed Luna and her sunshine magic out the front door.

It was a beautiful day, and Harry did, admittedly, feel much better once they were outdoors. Luna led Harry into the forest on a path that she seemed to know well. He was relieved for the direction she went —it was the opposite of the way that he, Harry, had needed to go the last time he was in the Forbidden Forest. As Harry glanced over his shoulder down that much darker path, a thought struck him.

Later—not now, but someday soon—he would need to go down that path again.

Fang bounded ahead of them, only to return moments later with his tail wagging and the occasional stick in his mouth that he seemed proud to have collected. Aside from praising him for being *such a good boy*, they walked in relative silence, for which Harry was grateful. It gave him time to settle his thoughts.

He would get McGonagall out of Azkaban, as well as every witch and wizard that was in there because of their supposed ‘war crimes’. He would free them all and then he would secure their teaching positions again, too, because Hogwarts needed professors who genuinely cared about their students and didn’t worship the Dark Lord like he was some kind of God.

As they walked, Harry had never felt more thankful for the presence that was Luna Lovegood. She was a cheery ball of bright yellow magic. Following her through the woods was like following some kind of fairy, maybe, or a miniature sun. Harry wondered if the Dark Lord

knew that she was here, visiting Hagrid regularly and helping him with whatever they were doing. Feeding the thestrals, he'd said, and fixing his hut and—

"Oh, my God," Harry said, suddenly aghast.

They came upon a clearing. One second it was thick trees and shrubs and the next it was nothing, a very defined line dividing where the lush foliage ended and the nothingness began. Harry looked up—he could even see where certain branches and leaves had been neatly incinerated, like a laser had annihilated them in a precise, slightly curving path.

It was huge, too. This clearing went on for what looked to be at least a kilometer, and in its void not a single thing grew. Only dirt remained, and even it did not look hospitable. Harry stepped into the clearing to feel that it was dry, dusty ground.

"What happened here…?" he asked.

Luna shrugged. "We aren't completely sure how, but clearly some kind of magical explosive curse was set off during the fighting. Neither Hagrid nor I know who did it, but it wiped out a good chunk of the forest, as you can tell."

Harry gasped. "Hermione," he said in awe.

"Hermione?"

Not seeing the point in lying about it, Harry nodded. "Yeah. Hermione did this when she and Ron were running from Voldemort. He caught Ron but not Hermione, who tried to take a bunch of them out right before she disapparated by setting off a huge exploding curse. Obviously it didn't get them all, because Voldemort somehow blocked it where he, Ron, and Bellatrix were…"

Harry appreciated that Luna didn't even blink at the use of Voldemort's name. Even if the Taboo was broken now, Harry had a feeling that the involuntary shuddering people had grown accustomed to would take some time to fade.

"Oh, well, that explains this part over here then." She led Harry further into the clearing, where there was a small, circular patch of land that he hadn't seen before, one that seemed relatively untouched. It wasn't very big, just a circle that was maybe a meter wide where grass still grew and half a poor shrug seemed to be struggling to

recover.

“Whoa,” Harry said, stepping onto the surviving grass. “That… this is wild.”

“Hagrid and I have been trying to come up with a plan to regrow,” Luna said. “Of course, Professor Sprout would be the best person to consult, but no one knows where she is. So Hagrid was given the task. I’ve just been helping.”

Rage boiled in Harry’s heart again. “Maybe she’s in Azkaban,” he muttered fiercely.

“Maybe,” Luna said. “Or she might be on the run.”

Harry looked around, the sudden urge to kick a rock nearly overwhelming him. There were none to be found in the wasteland; the only thing to be seen was Fang, who was running around them in wide circles in the open space.

“If she is in Azkaban, I will get her out,” Harry said. “Her and everyone who was put in there unfairly. The second that I can. I’ll *make* Voldemort release them.”

Luna looked at him with her somewhat eerie, unwavering stare. “I believe you,” she said.

And that, Harry realized, was the only thing he really needed to hear.

Rehabilitation

May bled into June, and the days unfolded into a strange but comforting rhythm. Harry would go to Hagrid's, accompanied by Draco—who would then go off and do whatever Draco liked to do. Narcissa would beam at him when they would leave, and Draco would smile like he truly was the perfect, obedient son that he surely wasn't. He and Harry had an unspoken agreement on this front. Harry never asked where he went, and when they would return to Malfoy Manor they would act like they had both spent a lovely evening on the outskirts of Hogwarts.

Which was only a half-lie, really. Harry was doing exactly that, and truthfully, he found it to be a rather cathartic and pleasant way to spend his time. He would drink tea with Hagrid and Luna and pet Fang, and sometimes all of them would go out to that ominous clearing. In the morning, they would plant new shrubbery, and in the evenings they would help Hagrid feed the thestrals.

"I know it's wrong ter say," he told them on the second evening, an hour before Malfoy would come to take Harry away, "but it's real nice ter have other people aroun' who can see 'em."

Their visits would conclude with more tea and conversation by Hagrid's fireplace. Sometimes they would talk about less monumental things, such as when certain flowers would be blooming in the forest and how the season shifting to summer would affect the creatures that lived there, or how repairs to the castle were set to begin in July. Harry was grateful for these conversations; they made him feel grounded and gave him hope that someday, things might be relatively normal again.

Sometimes, however, they would talk about far more upsetting topics, and Harry would be reminded how unlikely that was. He learned a lot in those evening conversations, and most of what was uncovered was very dark indeed.

Buckbeak, newly christened Witherwings, had been slaughtered in the fighting at Hogwarts that fateful night. So too had a number of the centaurs, and almost a dozen house-elves had been killed in the crossfire, defending the school. Professor Sprout and Flitwick were both missing; McGonagall was only confirmed in Azkaban because Harry had seen her; and Slughorn, Hagrid was almost certain, had been made into a Death Eater.

“Forced inter it, I reckon,” Hagrid has told him gruffly. “Told ter take the mark and pledge allegiance to the Dark Lord or be thrown in Azkaban.”

Harry had scoffed at that. “He should never have surrendered.”

“Really? Yeh think that woulda been best, if he had jus’ gotten ‘imself tossed in Azkaban, too? ‘Cause McGonagall wasn’t given that option, and with Sprout and Flitwick on the run—assumin' they're not in Azkaban, too—well, I’m jus’ glad there’s goin’ ter be at least *one* professor who doesn’t dole out Unforgivables as punishments in his classes. I don’ imagine you-know-who’s goin’ to hire any rays of sunshine to replace the rest ‘o the staff, do yeh?”

Which was a very good point, Harry had begrudgingly admitted, but it didn’t change his opinion on Slughorn. “He’s still a coward and a weakling,” Harry had spat.

To which Hagrid had, at least, not disagreed with. Luna had nodded her agreement as well, and even Fang had barked as though in support of the sentiment.

Some days Hagrid would accompany them to the clearing, but sometimes he would be busy with his other groundkeeping duties, and so Harry and Luna would go alone.

(Luna would always have her wand at the ready, of course; Harry kept his stowed away and hidden. Neither Hagrid nor Luna had asked if he had one, as he was sure they assumed that he did not.)

Fang would usually bound along with them most of the way, but sometimes he would wander off, intrigued by some sound or scent that Harry and Luna were less inclined to follow. It was good, Harry thought, that the clearing was not too deep into the forest. While they only ventured out during the day, Harry knew all too well the terrors that stirred there—and just because they tended to come out at night didn’t mean they weren’t there in the sunshine, too.

The days where Harry was alone with Luna were some of his most liberating. Harry could talk to her in ways that he did not think he could ever speak with anyone else, not even Hermione and Ron. He could tell Luna anything, and Harry knew that she would not look at him any differently.

He told her *some* things.

They had both been kneeling in the dirt on one particular warm afternoon, covered in sunshine and grime as they planted a mid-size flowering shrub that kept making Harry sneeze. Luna had looked at him and said, “You know, Harry, your aura has changed. It’s heavier. I’m not surprised at all; I think everybody’s has gotten a bit heavier. But, you know… sometimes you don’t have to carry it all by yourself. That weight.”

She’d smiled at him, and Harry had almost asked—*can you sense magic, too?* But those weren’t the words that came out. In fact, hardly any words came out at all. She'd put her hand on his shoulder and suddenly Harry was a sobbing, blubbering mess. In broken sentences that were probably indiscernible, he’d wailed about Neville; how he was tortured and killed and it was his fault, all his fault.

Luna had started crying then, too, and Harry had felt selfish for wanting to force more of his sorrow upon her. As Luna held him and cried with him, Harry thought about every miserable memory he had since he’d lost the war. He thought about his time in the cell and how he’d been blinded; of how willing he’d been to kill himself. He thought about being a horcrux and how Voldemort’s magic affected him in ways he couldn’t describe; how Voldemort himself was like a parasite, drawn to Harry’s soul in horrifying ways, an addict and a terror he could never rid himself of.

He thought about Ginny. He thought about what happened *after* Ginny.

Harry considered telling Luna Lovegood everything—but he couldn’t. He couldn’t put her life at risk like that. Voldemort may have kept Hermione, but he wasn’t going to let anyone else in on this most precious of secrets, not unless he could control them, too. Harry couldn’t damn Luna, not ever.

So he just cried. Luna had held him close and said the same words over and over to him, as though she understood everything, somehow.

“This isn’t your fault,” she’d said. “And we’re going to get through this.”

Harry wasn’t sure if he believed her.

It was on the fifth day since Voldemort’s departure that Harry’s routine was disrupted.

The first noteworthy event happened in the early morning. Harry was still in his room, looking at himself in the mirror as he finished getting dressed when he was assaulted by a wave of emotion that was definitely not his own and a flash of something that was definitely not his bedroom.

Joy. Pure and undiluted; it licked its way up his spine and burned in his heart. In his mind's eye he saw a dark space—someplace cold and eerie, and there was a man, an old man on his knees, his head bowed and one arm raised defensively… he was wandless and weak and utterly at his mercy…

"*Please*—" the old man gasped, and laughter bubbled in his throat—he raised the Elder Wand and this, he thought, was beauty in death; this was poetic justice at its finest—

As quickly as it had come, the vision was gone. Harry was once more looking at himself in the vanity mirror, the top buttons of his shirt still undone.

Come back, he thought, closing his eyes and trying to recall it, to see through the Dark Lord's eyes once more, to *know*—but it was useless. Voldemort's slip up was short, and Harry was once more shut out, unable to reach him.

He was left with his scar tingling and his mind racing. Who was that old man? And why had Voldemort been hunting him? Why was he about to *kill* him?

It reminded him viscerally of a different memory—one in which the Dark Lord had crossed oceans, all to track down Gellert Grindelwald, hoping to find the Elder Wand…

Harry didn't know the answers to those questions, but he knew one thing for sure. The Dark Lord had finished whatever he'd needed to do, by murdering that man. Which could only mean one thing.

Harry turned and left his room.

"Finish buttoning your shirt, dear!" the mirror called after him. "You'll look a mess if you don't!"

That day at Hagrid's was easily the least enjoyable one yet. He, Hagrid, and Luna went out to the clearing together, Fang in toe, this time planting over a dozen new trees. It would have been much more

trying work were it not for Hagrid's colossal strength and size and the use of Luna's wand, but as it was, they got a lot done—even with Harry pretending like he was still wandless. It was good, he thought, to use his hands; to dig with a shovel and not rely on magic. And any other day he would have relished the experience.

Today, however, Harry was a mess of nerves. He kept expecting Voldemort to show up at any moment. To say or do what, Harry wasn't quite sure—and it was the not knowing that troubled him more than anything. Hagrid didn't seem to notice his anxiety, but Luna did. Harry caught her looking at him more than once, frowning in concern. Harry forced himself to smile as though everything was fine. *No need to worry her that Voldemort might appear*, he thought. That would really put a damper on their planting.

Yet the day passed in relative calm, and no Dark Lord came to disrupt their hard work. They fed the thestrals and drank tea by the fire and Harry was beginning to wonder if maybe he had imagined the scene of an old man begging altogether.

He hadn't, of course—but it was nice to entertain the possibility that he had.

When Draco arrived in the Outpost to 'collect' him, the sun beginning to set, Harry was surprised when they did not immediately leave.

"How do you spend your days here, anyway?" Draco asked, catching Harry off guard.

"What do you mean? You know exactly how I spend my days here. I tell your mother all about it at dinner and pretend like you were there. You nod along and everything."

"That's not what I meant," Draco drawled. He looked across the field of grass at Hagrid's hut like he found it the most offensive structure in the world. "I just mean… *how*? With that half-giant and that Lovegood girl for company."

Harry could at least appreciate that he hadn't said 'giant oaf' and 'Loony Lovegood' to describe them. Sometimes, Harry mused, it really was like Draco was trying. "They're my friends," Harry said coolly.

"Some friends."

"It's not like I have anything better to do, with Hermione and Ron gone. I think a better question is how you spend *your* days. Or your

father. Where does he go, all the time?"

"Do you want to know?" Draco asked, his magic suddenly brightening. "About me, at any rate… couldn't tell you about my father. I keep assuming that someday he shall show me all his hiding places, and I continue to be disappointed. I figured he would enlighten me when I came of age, or today, considering… but alas. All I got for turning seventeen was a very nice watch and some questionable advice on what to look for in a wife, and it seems turning eighteen was just as disappointing. I do like my watch, though."

He smiled brightly, lifting his wrist and flashing what was, indeed, a very nice, silver watch. Harry's scowl deepened. "Lovely," he said scathingly. "I used to have a silver watch, too. Mrs. Weasley gave it to me. I lost it before I was locked up in your dungeon—you know, where I was tortured and blinded and all that. I imagine the shackles didn't fit over it nicely, so it was tossed. Your mum bought me this shiny new one to make up for it, but I preferred the one that I had before. I guess she thought I was a gold person."

Harry gave Draco an equally bright smile, showing him the watch he now wore. It was truly satisfying to watch the way Draco's stature diminished and his magic withered. There may have been moments where it was clear Draco was trying to be… *better*, but still.

Harry would never let him forget what happened.

Ever the proud Malfoy, however, Draco quickly recovered. "Well then," he said matter-of-factly, "I suppose we will have to acquire you another one, then, in silver, won't we?"

"You can't replace something that had nostalgic value, Malfoy. I know this is probably a foreign concept to you, but money can't fix everything."

"I beg to differ."

Just like that, Malfoy's slanted grin was back in place, his magic far more silvery that any jewelry. "You're curious as to how Draco Malfoy spends his days, Potter? I'll do you one better. I'll show you how Draco Malfoy spends his *nights*."

He turned, walking towards the Outpost with that familiar swagger in his step. "What's that supposed to mean?" Harry called, following after him. "We're supposed to go back to your Manor every night, I thought."

“Never said we wouldn’t go back… eventually. Besides, the bigger part of our responsibility over you was to rehabilitate you. Introduce you to the proper ways of pureblood, magical living. You’re hardly getting any of that hanging out in a hut with these two.”

He pushed open the door of the Outpost, then held it open for him. “What do you say, Potter? Do you want to go back to my dear mum and spend another night going to bed early? Or do you want to see what the magical world really has to offer?” He gave Harry a narrow-eyed, judging look. “I bet the most exciting place you’ve been is Hogsmeade.”

Harry opened his mouth to argue—he had been to many magical, exciting places—but Malfoy cut him off. “Where you had any fun, I mean.”

Harry thought about that for a moment. Draco smirked. “Exactly.”

It *was* tempting; Harry hadn’t been anywhere besides the Manor and the outskirts of Hogwarts in a while.

“Won’t your mum be worried if we don’t get back soon?” Harry asked.

“I can send her a message if we're out too late. Trust me, she’ll just be overjoyed that we’re *bonding*.”

“Are we bonding?” Harry asked dryly.

“Only if you play your cards right. Come on, let's get out of here.”

Harry could see why Draco was excited. He thought he had a brand new opportunity to win Harry over, perhaps… and he was at quite an advantage. He had a vast amount of knowledge that Harry did not, and, as far as he knew, he was the only one with a wand.

How wrong he was.

Still, the flash into Voldemort’s mind that morning perturbed him. What if the Dark Lord showed up at the manor tonight? What if he was there now, waiting for Harry to return?

It was that notion that settled it for Harry.

“All right,” he said, and Draco’s magic flashed in victory. “Rehabilitate me, Malfoy.”

Cloak and Laurel

“Cloak and Laurel.”

The flames erupted green as Malfoy uttered the words and tossed the powder into the fireplace. He stepped aside, motioning politely for Harry to go first—a motion that nearly made Harry laugh. Malfoy never let Harry go before him; he always threw the powder in and stepped into the floo like he couldn’t get away from Hagrid’s hut quickly enough. Now, however, he waited, smiling in what Harry was sure Malfoy thought was a charming manner.

Harry returned his smile with a fake grin of his own, then stepped into the flames. Instantly, he was swept away, sent spinning in a whirlwind of green…

When he emerged, it was into a dimly lit and extravagant hall.

He was in an entryway of what was clearly an expensive bar. It was a long, narrow hallway that was all aglow with faerie lights, the end of which had a doorway that must have led to the main part of the building. The ceiling was lined in mirrors, which Harry was startled to see, and at intervals along the narrow counter on one side were vases full of huge, blood-red flowers—Harry recognized them vaguely as one of the many blooms Professor Sprout had kept in Greenhouse One. In the entryway with him were three wizards in nondescript but elegant black robes, two of which were behind the counter. They all turned to look at the new arrival.

There was a moment where Harry simply stared at them, staring at him. Their brows all rose in surprise. Their magic froze. None of them said anything.

“Here we are,” Malfoy announced as he appeared a second later. He stepped into the entryway—which Harry now saw was lined with fireplaces—and straightened the front of his robes. “Cloak and Laurel. One of the finest wizarding clubs in London.”

His words seemed to startle the staff back into action. “How very kind of you, Mr. Malfoy,” one of them said—a young, handsome man who reminded Harry painfully of Cedric. His magic was a hazy blue-green. Harry noted the familiarity with which he said his name; clearly, this was a place that Draco Malfoy came often. “Always a pleasure to serve you.”

Malfoy ignored him. “Come on, Potter. Let’s go in and get a drink already.”

“P-Potter? As in, Harry Potter?”

Harry would have noticed their sudden unease even if their magic hadn’t given them away. The workers all tensed, visibly, as they were left without any doubt as to who had just entered their establishment.

Malfoy stood tall and lifted his chin, effectively making it so that he was looking down on the poor worker who had just stuttered Harry’s name. “Yes, as in Harry Potter. I trust you read the papers, boy? He is the Malfoy family’s ward—on the Dark Lord’s own orders. Not that it’s any concern of *yours*.”

His sneering voice was enough to give Harry flashbacks to their school days. “O-of course, yes,” the worker said, bowing his head. “I just—right this way, Mr. Malfoy.”

He quickly turned to lead them down the hall. Malfoy followed, and Harry, trying not to be distracted by the faerie lights or the ceiling mirrors, did the same.

“I’m your family’s what now?” he murmured as they walked.

“Ward. Obviously. Or would you rather me say ‘reluctant, free-loading tenant’?”

“I think I do prefer that, really.”

Malfoy scoffed but didn’t add further comment.

They had just arrived at the door leading further into the club when the worker stopped. He motioned towards a strange wall, one that was covered in holes big enough to fit one's hand into. Only, they were lined in what looked to be some kind of leather. Some of them were open, some of them were tied shut. It was the oddest wall that Harry had ever seen.

“Your wands, if you please,” the worker said, motioning towards it.

Without pause, and to Harry’s surprise, Malfoy pulled out his wand. He slipped it into one of the open holes in the wall without question, then tied the bag shut.

“Mokeskin containers,” he explained to Harry, who was surely

watching Malfoy surrender his wand unquestionably in utter shock.

“Mokeskin…?”

“Of course. It’s a standard policy at places like this—the decent ones, anyway. Mokeskin makes it so no one but the rightful owner of the wand can retrieve it.”

Harry took a moment to consider that. Really, he thought, it was quite genius. Having a bunch of wizards getting drunk in a public space did seem like a recipe for disaster, and making it so that they all had to keep their wands out of reach was an excellent way to mitigate any potential damage. Mokeskin was probably the only foolproof way to ensure that the owners of the wands would not have them stolen.

It also must have been bloody expensive, too, Harry thought. He knew the mokeskin bag that Hagrid had once gotten him was far from cheap.

Unwittingly, Harry recalled the last time he had seen that bag. When Voldemort had forced him to open it, to reveal all his most precious items…

Maybe I have an affection for broken and damaged things.

…before vanishing them all, forever.

“It’s perfectly safe,” the worker said, drawing Harry’s focus back to the present. “At Cloak and Laurel we take the utmost pride in making sure that all of our—”

“Just take us in,” Malfoy interrupted in a drawl. The worker gave Harry a questioning a look but didn’t seem to want to argue with Malfoy or ask anything of Harry at all. He eventually nodded stiffly, then opened the door for them to go in. Evocative, jazzy music met their ears, and Harry could see more faerie lights illuminating a much larger space.

Harry swallowed hard. Malfoy didn’t think he had a wand, that was perfectly clear. Harry was content to let him—and everyone who worked here—think that. He took a deep breath and followed Malfoy into Cloak and Laurel.

The second he stepped over the threshold, the doorway lit up in blue.

Malfoy whipped around. His magic become bright and frazzled, as did

that of the worker's.

"S-so sorry, sir," the worker said. "But I must ask that you stow your wand at the front like Mr. Malfoy did. It's for the protection of all our clients…"

Harry tensed. He really didn't want to give away that he had a wand at all, let alone the Dark Lord's wand…

Malfoy stared at him, confused, but said nothing. Harry, not seeing a way around it, reached into his pocket and withdrew the yew wand.

The worker didn't recognize anything odd about it, but Malfoy certainly did.

It was obvious by his magic. Malfoy's aura became a cold, stagnant sheet about him as he saw Harry retract a wand which he must have come to know very well while the Dark Lord lived in their manor.

This was the wand that had tortured his father to near-insanity…

Harry shoved it into one of the open mokeskin bags. He tied it up, rushing to hide the most sinister and ominous of wands from sight. He turned back to Malfoy with a falsely cheery smile on his face. "Shall we, then?"

Malfoy was still staring, wide-eyed and slack-jawed. The questions were clear on his face—how, and *why* had Harry gotten that wand?—but he recovered quickly enough. Malfoy straightened his posture and his expression slid back into one of arrogance and superiority with an impressive swiftness.

Compartmentalizing, Harry thought. He could almost *see* the way Malfoy had shoved that shock and his many questions aside, ignoring his emotions despite how much they bothered him. Harry felt like he, personally, was starting to get the hang of that ability as well.

Bottle it up. Set it aside. Compartmentalize.

Malfoy's posture might have returned to a façade of normalcy; his magic, however, remained tense. "Yes, let's," he said. "Salazar knows I could use a drink."

Cloak and Laurel was a much more impressive sight on this side of the door. The hall was massive, with tall, arching ceilings that Harry was pleased to see did not have a single mirror on them. There were tables

scattered about, all with luxurious looking seats and couches surrounding them, all with vases full of those same, crimson flowers. Several bars were placed throughout the space, including one at the back, which was illuminated by faerie lights solely in blue; one to the far right, which seemed to be made entirely of marble and which was illuminated by faerie lights in yellow, making the whole thing appear gold; and one in the center of the room, which was by far the largest. This bar was a full circle, and in the center of it were a few tall, narrow trees. Harry wasn't sure, but he could only assume they were laurel trees, based on the name of the club. Faerie lights in all colors hovered about the branches, making it glow in a kaleidoscopic way.

It was not the kind of establishment where young witches and wizards would come to dance and party, but the sort of place that politicians or businessmen would frequent. Classy, sophisticated. *Exclusive*. And it didn't take much to figure out that it probably cost a small fortune to drink here.

Malfoy navigated the hall with the air of someone who knew it well. Harry followed, trying and failing to not be distracted by the things he kept noticing. Some of the elegant chairs, he saw, were simply floating, not connected to the ground in any way at all, and the red flowers definitely moved when they passed, their petals opening wider and turning on their stems to face them as though inviting them to sit there. The faerie lights too would glow brighter when they were near, helpfully brightening their path in an otherwise dim club wherever they moved.

It was all so *magical*.

It was also relatively empty—perhaps not surprising, considering it was still early in the evening—and that made it therefore easy to pick out some of the only other occupants in the club… the ones that Malfoy was taking Harry towards in a beeline through the hall.

"Draco!" a familiar voice called. It was Daphne Greengrass.

She was waving them over, and on either side of her on the couches and chairs, to Harry's displeasure, were several other Slytherins. Pansy Parkinson was on her left on the same couch, and across from them was Blaise Zabini, Theodore Nott, and, on a separate couch by himself… Gregory Goyle.

Even from a distance, Harry thought he looked so incomplete without Crabbe by his side.

Forcing that notion aside—compartmentalizing—Harry scowled, for it clicked, then. Malfoy's group of Slytherin peers were all looking quite expectant, and he hadn't noticed earlier, but Malfoy was dressed slightly nicer than usual today, wasn't he? He had a serpent brooch on that he didn't normally wear, some fancy silver thing, and cuff links to match…

Harry grabbed Malfoy by the shoulder, effectively stopping him. Malfoy turned and raised a brow at him.

"You planned this," Harry said. Not a question but an accusation. "This wasn't just some whim of an idea you had, to take me somewhere else—you planned to drag me into a little outing with your… your gang of Slytherins tonight, didn't you?"

Malfoy's nose wrinkled as the word *gang*, clearly finding it distasteful, but then he smirked again. "A Slytherin always plans their moves, Potter," he murmured. "You would have never agreed if I'd mentioned that this lot would be here. Also, my mother already knows all about this. Was very supportive of you mingling with the right sort, in fact. So no worries there."

He clapped Harry on the shoulder like he was being a good sport about it, even though Harry was glowering and feeling nothing of the sort. He very badly wanted to turn around and leave right then. The only person in that group he was on even moderately decent terms with was Daphne, and even she had openly admitted to using him at the wedding reception for her own gain.

"Besides," he went on, still speaking quietly. "It's my birthday. So, consider this my gift from you."

And before Harry could respond to that, Draco was pushing him forward, towards some of the people Harry liked least in the world. Bigots and bullies, and Harry somehow found himself allowing Malfoy to force him towards their table rather than make a scene in public and refuse to go near them.

"Draco," Parkinson said when they were closer. She stood, instantly stepping towards Malfoy with a big smile on her face. She was wearing dress robes in deep green, similar to her seaweed-like, slimy magic. Her smile faltered and she pursed her lips. "You're late."

"He's allowed to be late, today," said Daphne, smiling. "Happy birthday, Draco!"

The others chorused similar sentiments, lifting their glasses towards him. Draco shrugged them off, and Harry was mildly astonished at that.

"Yes, well. I had to make a stop to pick up our… *celebrity* guest."

He patted Harry on the shoulder again. The group all grinned or chuckled at the reminder of their first potions class in which Harry had been introduced—embarrassingly so—as such… but Harry's stomach dropped at the thought.

Snape had said that about him.

And Snape was dead.

Harry swallowed hard and, yet again, forced himself not to dwell on such memories—to not let the images that threatened to flash through his mind take over; images of seeing his ex-professor through a crack in the floor, Nagini's floating orb sparkling and the way Snape's eyes kept darting towards it knowingly—

I regret it.

"You all right, Potter?"

It was Theodore Nott who had spoken. He was leaning back in his floating armchair, a wine glass held lightly by the stem in his hand. His magic was, Harry was surprised to see, a delicate tint of lilac. It was a little frosty, almost veering on blue in parts, and had a mild sheen to it. It was quite… pretty, Harry thought. Which was not a word that he would ever use to describe Theodore Nott himself. He was a stringy looking wizard, with a small, round face and weak chin. His eyes were easily his most striking feature—they were a piercing, dark blue. Currently, they were fixed on Harry, calculating. When Harry didn't immediately answer him, he said, "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Harry fixed a smile on his face. "Just surprised in general," he said. "Malfoy neglected to tell me it was his birthday, and that we'd be spending the evening with most of Slytherin's graduating class… assuming you all graduated, of course."

Harry hadn't looked at Goyle when he said it, but Goyle took it personally, anyway. His magic—which was a deep, charcoal gray—roiled, and he leaned forward on the couch, looking like he was about to get up. "'Course we all did. 'Cause we all actually went to school

our seventh year, didn' we?"

He sneered the last words, looking self-satisfied. Harry glowered down at him. "Yeah, lucky you. Some of us were too busy running for our lives. But—"

"But that's not the case anymore, is it?" Daphne cut in. She placed a hand on Goyle's knee, seemingly placating him. Her sea-foamy magic bubbled. "Times have certainly changed, that much we can all agree on. Harry, why don't you sit?"

She patted the space next to her. Parkinson, who had taken her spot back at Daphne's other side on the long couch, folded her arms across her chest and looked wary—her aura had darkened when she called Harry by his first name—but she didn't say anything.

Harry had a half a mind to say 'no thanks' and turn around again, but something in Daphne's smile made him not. There was a cloaked but present urgency there, in that expression, and her eyes and magic were both bright. Like she was saying, 'You'd best do this.'

Harry, still glaring at Goyle, sat. The red flowers on the table opened more widely as he did, turning towards him as though in welcome. Daphne's magic relaxed a bit, as did Malfoy's, but everyone else's—Goyle's, Parkinson's, Nott's, and Zabini's—grew tenser.

And it was only then that Harry noted Zabini's unique magical signature. It was nothing like his mother's, which had been coppery and bright. His was a deep blue, but unlike Narcissa's, it was fluid—like liquid sapphires. It was quite captivating, but also quite… quiet, Harry thought, which probably explained why Harry hadn't picked up on it sooner. He tried not to become distracted by it as it shimmered, shining with wariness as Harry Potter joined them.

At least I know none of them have wands, Harry thought scornfully.

Malfoy sat next to Goyle and raised his hand, and a waiter appeared at once. "A firewhisky for me," Malfoy said, "and for my *friend,* Harry…"

The waiter's eyes focused on Harry, and, unsurprisingly, they went wide. His magic, which was an orange-yellow, brightened with shock.

Harry knew of very few alcoholic drinks in the wizarding world. Looking around at the various drinks that these Slytherins had, all of which were nearly full, did little to help him. "Er… same," he eventually said, feeling awkward.

“Well? You heard him, then,” Draco snapped, for the waiter was staring at Harry’s red eyes and lightning bolt scar as though stunned by them. “Two firewhiskies. Make it quick.”

“Of course, right away,” said the waiter before silently disappearing.

“You can apparate in here?” Harry asked.

“Only those who work here,” Zabini drawled. “Obviously.”

Harry glared at him, annoyed, for it was not obvious to him at all.

“Forgive Zabini," said Daphne. "He forgets that not everyone is fortunate enough to frequent such establishments regularly. Most places like this—where alcohol is served—have complex wards in place so that only certain individuals within the limits are able to apparate. So that drunk people don’t accidentally splinch themselves, I’m sure you understand, or leave in a rush and forget their wands. Or to pay, I suppose,” she explained, adding the last part as though that thought had never really occurred to her before—that someone might try to *not* pay their bill somewhere like this.

Harry nodded, for that did make a great deal of sense. “I wonder how that kind of warding works,” he murmured. It would certainly be a nice skill to have, he thought, to be able to construct wards where only certain people could apparate. Or to be able to manipulate wards that already existed like that, such as the one around Malfoy Manor…

“Oh, it’s horribly complicated. And boring, if my cousin is to be believed,” Daphne said. “He’s attending a trade school in Italy that focuses specifically on warding. He hopes to come back and work for Gringotts someday. A respectable position, but it sounds awfully dull, if you ask me.”

And just that small anecdote was enough to make Harry realize how very little indeed he knew about the wizarding world. He had no idea there were entire schools dedicated to training people in how to make wards. He barely knew of any potential jobs one could have after school, really, aside from teaching or working for the Ministry of Magic.

“I see,” Harry said. He wished he had anything interesting to add at all.

The waiter reappeared. Two amber-filled glasses floated from his tray, one into Malfoy’s hand, and another into Harry’s.

“Thank you,” Harry said, accepting the glass.

The waiter looked more alarmed that Harry had addressed him then pleased. He nodded, this time opting to not look at him at all rather than ogle. “Does anyone need anything else?” he asked. Everyone shook their heads, their glasses still mostly full. “Excellent. I shall check on you soon.”

He vanished again, not making any sound at all. That was also probably a useful trick, Harry thought. To not make that obnoxious *cracking* sound that gave you away at once when apparating. The Dark Lord could do that, too…

“Cheers, then,” Malfoy said, raising his glass. “To new beginnings.”

“To new beginnings!” Daphne echoed at once. "And to *you,* Draco, of course."

"Yes, happy birthday, Draco!" said Parkinson.

The rest followed suit, lifting their glasses. Harry did not immediately copy them. Clearly, this whole thing had been planned for a while, and not just by Draco. None of them had seemed surprised at all to see him, and they all kept giving each other odd, stern looks—most of which seemed to come from Draco and Daphne and were met begrudgingly by the others. Yes, this was definitely a get-together that had been pre-determined—a coordinated effort to pull Harry Potter into their circle.

While Daphne and Draco seemed genuinely interested in making him one of theirs, and Nott and Zabini at least seemed mildly interested, Parkinson and Goyle looked skeptical at best. Harry was hardly surprised. While he had never exactly gotten on with either Zabini or Nott, Parkinson had tried point-blank to hand him over to Voldemort at the Battle of Hogwarts, and Goyle, no doubt, blamed Harry for the death of his best mate—though that was clearly Crabbe’s own fault, casting fiendfyre like that. Still, Harry wondered how many times Malfoy had to demand that the two of them accept that this was happening… to *try* to win over the infamous Harry Potter.

The bigger question was what did Harry want, here? Would befriending these Slytherins benefit him enough for him to want to try? To *pretend,* of course—nothing would make him actually prefer their company over Ron’s and Hermione’s. But to put up the façade that he was one of them… was that an effort worth making?

Of course it is, that small, knowledgeable voice said in the back of Harry's mind. *If you play the part and convince people that you truly are one of them, you'll gain their trust. Independence. Freedom.*

Power.

He thought of Hermione, of how she had twisted her position into something that gave her exactly that—power. She had gone from playing the part of the poster, registered muggle-born girl to being a known Death Eater and forcing Voldemort to promote her to his personal assistant—not to mention the fact that she kept the tradition of the Sorting intact at Hogwarts. If she could get up in front of the entirety of Wizarding Britain and do that, then surely he, Harry, could pretend to tolerate and enjoy the company of these Slytherin prats. To act the part until he, Hermione, and Ron figured out how to turn the tides… and to tear this whole new regime down from the inside out.

But to do that, they needed power first.

They all stared at him, waiting. Harry smiled and finally raised his glass as well. "To new beginnings," he said as charmingly as he could. He looked longest at Goyle when he said it, whose magic quivered under the stare of his red, vibrant eyes that were identical to Lord Voldemort's. To his credit, he didn't physically shrink away, which Harry could at least respect.

So many people winced when he looked at them now.

Harry lifted his glass to his lips, then took a deep drink, and around him the rest did the same. Beside him, drinking some bright pink, bubbly cocktail, Daphne's magic danced in approval.

"So, Harry," she said once he'd set his glass down, "speaking of new beginnings… do you think you'll return to Hogwarts to finish your schooling? Now that you're pardoned."

Harry stared at the unexpected question. He had never once considered going back to school. Not so long ago, he had doubted that he would ever see sunlight again. "I… I don't know," he said honestly.

"Well, you should at least think about it," Daphne said.

"Depends on what he wants to do with his life," Nott said. He was twirling his glass around in his hands—a dark, red wine—and staring at Harry with that calculative look again. Like he was trying to figure out what, exactly, made Harry Potter tick. "What do you intend to do

now, Potter?"

"I…"

Harry's voice trailed off as he seriously thought about the answer. He hadn't had the time nor energy to think about a career. His whole life had revolved around bringing down Lord Voldemort and not dying a terrible, bloody death before he could manage the task.

Which was still his true goal, truth be told—whether that was by literally defeating him or by the much less likely possibility of managing to make him feel remorse and heal his soul—but Harry wasn't about to admit that out loud. Which also meant he couldn't very well say he wanted to be an auror anymore, as he was pretty sure that position would now require that he hunt down Order of the Phoenix Members, not Death Eaters.

If he was free to live a life… to do whatever he pleased, to not make every decision based on the ever-present threat of the Dark Lord…

They were all watching him with varying degrees of curiosity. "I might play Quidditch," Harry eventually said. "You know, try to do it professionally."

"Who would you play for?" Malfoy immediately asked. "Given that you were good enough to make the cut for any team in the League, of course."

Harry glowered. He would never pretend to take credit for much of the rest of his impressive track record—many of the more magnificent things he had done had been the result of pure luck—but this was not true of Quidditch. Being a great flier was something he was good at, naturally, and was proud of it. "I reckon I would be, given my history… Youngest Seeker in a century and all that. Even Viktor Krum said I was an excellent flier."

He noted the impressed looks of the others—Parkinson looking so seemingly despite herself. "Hell, you should know that better than anyone, Malfoy," Harry went on. He grinned widely. "You were my favorite person to beat."

"You got lucky, mostly," Malfoy muttered.

"You think so? That I got lucky every single match?"

Malfoy opened his mouth to snarl something else, but Harry cut him

off. “Okay, sure,” he said. “Let’s say you’re right. I’ll pretend to agree that luck might have had something to do with it. I’ll challenge you to a rematch anytime you like.”

“You’re on.”

Harry stuck out his hand. “Then let’s make it interesting. Loser has to be the other’s slave for an entire day—to do anything the winner asks of them. Shall we make an Unbreakable Oath? I’m sure someone would agree to be out Bonder.”

The red flowers had followed his hand, opening up towards his outstretched palm and leaning now towards Malfoy. It was hard not to laugh at the way his magic paled. “Kidding of course,” Harry said. “Gullible, aren’t you, Malfoy?”

He lowered his hand and went to pick up his glass, taking a sip of whisky. The flowers wilted back into their usual position. Everyone but Parkinson—even Goyle, to Harry’s amusement—laughed.

“We *will* have a rematch someday, Potter,” Malfoy sneered, taking a drink himself and glaring down at the red flowers. “But we’ll think of something more interesting than forcing the loser to be a house-elf for a day.”

“Can’t wait,” Harry said cheerfully.

“What team *would* you play for, Potter? If you went professional,” Nott asked. There was something about the way he talked and the way his magic moved that gave Harry a strange impression. Like everything he asked was much deeper than it really was; like every word Harry said was being deeply analyzed. Probably was, knowing Slytherins.

“Er,” Harry said, unsure how to answer. His first thought was to say the Chudley Canons, as that had been Ron’s favorite team and had therefore become Harry’s, too, but he had a feeling this was not who they rooted for. “Maybe Puddlemore United,” he eventually said.

Nott nodded like this answer appeased him. “Oldest team in the League,” he said.

Harry wasn’t sure that this mattered, but he was saved from needing to say anything by Daphne. “Can we *not* talk about Quidditch all night?” she pouted, giving Harry the impression that exactly this happened often. “It’s so boring. And not the most stable career path,

Harry, if that's really what you're thinking about. You might want to consider Ministry work. My father works in the Department of International Magical Cooperation, and he said that—"

"Maybe we can *not* talk about his potential career endeavors at all?" Zabini cut in. "Clearly Potter hasn't given it much thought until just now, with you badgering him about it. Can't exactly blame him, can you?" He cast Harry a slanted smile. "If it were me, I would just want to focus on having fun for a while."

"That's a fair point," Daphne said, looking mildly disappointed. But she brightened up again almost at once. "Oooh, you should travel, Harry. See the world a bit. Have you ever been to Italy? Venice, where my cousin is living, is gorgeous—if you can deal with all the muggles, that is."

The table collectively made noises of annoyed agreement. "They really are getting out of hand," Zabini drawled, and Goyle nodded deeply.

"Yes, well," Nott said, "I have it on good authority that there are plans being put in place to address the muggle problem sooner rather than later."

"Oh?" said Parkinson, her magic twisting in interest. "What do you mean?"

The others are leaned forward, too, but Harry was surprised most by Malfoy's reaction. He seemed less surprised that Nott had some inside, Ministry information, and more… angered. While he kept his face mostly composed, his magic had become sharp with both confusion and irritation.

"Well. As you know, my father works for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He's Umbridge's superior, so he's been instrumental in developing the Muggle-born Registration Committee. But he does much more important things than that, and he's been given more and more responsibilities lately. He's risen through the ranks quite spectacularly since the end of the war. And while I can't say the details about what he's been working on, let's just say that there are laws being written now that would directly affect the growth of the muggle population. Starting in Britain, of course, but hopefully something which will continue to expand throughout Europe. My father intends for me to start training in his department soon. It will be an extremely pivotal campaign for the Dark Lord's Regime, mark my words."

He took a sip of his drink, looking the epitome of haughty as he did. The rest of the group stared at him in awe—especially Parkinson, whose seaweed-like magic was gleaming almost covetously as she looked at his smug face.

Everyone except Malfoy, Harry noticed, whose aura was cringing about him like he might be sick. Harry was able to piece together why quickly enough, and it had nothing to do with the muggles. At one point, that had been him. Draco Malfoy was used to being the one to hint at ideas of power and knowing more than the rest of them.

Harry doubted that Lucius 'popped in' much at the Ministry anymore, though—not since he'd spent time in Azkaban only to return home and be grievously tortured by the Dark Lord himself. The Malfoy family may have been forgiven to some extent, but they were no longer favored like they once more. Nott's family had clearly risen to fill that gap.

But Harry could really care less about all that. What disturbed him was *what* Nott had just suggested. "Are you saying they're going to control how many muggles are born every year, somehow…?"

Nott grinned deviously at him, his pastel magic flashing. "Something along those lines," he said. "Nothing that would threaten the Statue of Secrecy though… yet."

Harry had to physically stop himself from expressing his outrage.

He was, naturally, the only one with such thoughts. Parkinson squealed and clapped her hands in delight, looking at Nott as though he had suddenly become the most handsome and desirable man in the world. "That's *so* exciting, Theodore," she gushed. "I'm so thrilled for you that you get to be a part of it!"

Harry remembered how once, this girl had stared at Malfoy with eyes like that. How she had been stroking his hair in their train compartment before he announced, vaguely, that he was a Death Eater and had looked at him like he was practically a god.

She wasn't looking at him, now.

"And what will *you* be doing? Taking notes while your father attends important meetings?" Draco asked, his voice barely above a sneer.

"No," Nott answered coolly. "That's what Quick-Quote Quills are for… I'll be hired on as a research assistant specializing in the development

of certain potions. I received an O in Potions in my N.E.W.T.s, so I'm perfectly qualified."

"Potion development?" Zabini asked. "That does sound intriguing… you always were good at Potions, Theo."

"As were you," Nott said, lifting his glass in his direction. "If it's something you might be interested in, I could always put in a good word for you, Blaise."

Harry noticed that this offer was not extended to Draco Malfoy.

Blaise shrugged. "I still plan on taking a year off," he said. "But maybe after that. Given that I'm not too busy sorting out all my mother's affairs. *She* is a full-time job, I swear."

The others chuckled as he shook his head and sighed.

"Weren't you also in Potions at the N.E.W.T. level, Harry?" Daphne asked, turning to him.

"Er, yeah. In sixth year."

"And you were remarkably good, if the way Draco complained about it was any indication," she said, smirking. "Another reason it might be worth going back to school. Getting your N.E.W.T.s will open up all sorts of possibilities."

Like participating in the slow and underhanded genocide of muggles? Harry thought but didn't say. "I still think Quidditch is more my style," he said instead.

"But Puddlemore United?" Blaise said, his aura lightening. "I mean, they're all right, but if you're going to try you might as well go for the best. The Montrose Magpies are a far more formidable team."

Goyle scoffed loudly. "Bunch of tossers. Everyone knows that. Chudley Cannons are better."

"I think so too!" Harry said, honestly shocked that he and Goyle would agree on anything. Goyle looked equally surprised. "I'd definitely rather play for them than the Magpies."

"Then why'd you say Puddlemore United?" Malfoy asked.

"They are a better team, objectively," Harry said, shrugging. "Better chance of playing for the World Cup, which is what I'd really like to

do." He recalled it then—the boisterous crowds, the huge playing field, the excitement and energy in anticipation of the game. Harry could easily imagine himself in place of Viktor Krum, playing Seeker for a major team as they'd fly over the crowds, half of which would be screaming for them to win, the other half that they would fail…

He grinned. "Really, really like to do," he reiterated.

"Better reason to play for the Canons then," Goyle said. His heavy magic was growing a bit lighter, but he was still clearly conflicted about engaging in anything resembling normal conversation with Harry.

"Why's that?" Harry asked.

Goyle leaned forward a little, holding his drink out and pointing at Harry with one finger. "Canons just got a new Chaser *and* a new Beater. Their Keeper's decent and so are the rest, all but their Seeker. Roberts is a waste. Only reason he hasn't been kicked off yet is because they haven't gotten anybody better…"

His voice trailed off, and his heavy magic shifted in the liveliest way it had moved yet. Harry had to admit, Goyle knew his Quidditch. Ron had been saying similar things for years—that if it weren't for Roberts, the Canons could have gone on to play in the World Cup themselves. Harry's lips twitched. "Are you suggesting that I could replace Roberts?" he asked.

Goyle gave a half-hearted shrug. "I'm not *not* sayin' that," he said, then took a drink—firewhisky as well, it looked like.

Harry couldn't help the grin that formed on his face. Goyle was smirking too, and it was the strangest and most unanticipated moments of camaraderie in that it was genuine.

"That would be pretty great," Harry said. He almost laughed, imagining Ron's reaction if he were to get on the Chudley Cannons. He would lose his damn mind. "Not sure bright orange is my color, though."

Beside him, Harry felt Daphne's magic beginning to vibrate in annoyance, surely because the conversation was indeed beginning to revolve around Quidditch. Her face, however, remained pleasantly composed, and so no one paid her any mind.

"Also unlikely that Roberts would just roll over and resign if you tried

to boot him off," Zabini added. "He's only been on the team what, four years?"

"*Nine* years. And that's not up to him, is it?" Goyle muttered. "He's had plenty of time to prove himself. He's holding 'em back."

"He's not that terrible," Malfoy said. "Remember that catch he made a few seasons ago against the Arrows? Dodged two bludgers at once before catching the Snitch in an upward spin!"

"Talk about winning out of pure luck!" Zabini shouted, brandishing his own glass—something that Harry would say resembled a martini, but he really had no idea. "The only reason he made that upward dive at all was because he didn't even see the bludgers heading his way!"

"Bollocks!" Malfoy snapped. "He knew what he was doing!"

"I actually have to side with Malfoy on that one," Harry said. He had seen that exact play in the book Ron had bought him, and there was no way it had been an accident. "Roberts swerved way too purposefully for that to be luck. He used the bludgers to his advantage, actually; it was his own Beaters that hit them and they acted as a wall to block off the Arrows' Seeker…"

Malfoy grinned. "See?" he said. "And that's to say nothing of that one match they had against the Holyhead Harpies…"

"What are you going on about?" Nott drawled. "The Harpies have never lost to the Canons." He turned to flash a grin at Harry. "Too bad you're not a witch, Potter. You'd be better off on their team than the *Canons*."

The others laughed, but Harry's smile faltered. Another memory stormed his mind, one that was full of sunshine and warmth…

I'd like to play for the Holyhead Harpies. Ginny. She had smiled as she'd admitted it to him. *Chaser, of course.*

Harry shook the vision away. *Compartmentalize.*

"Yeah," he said. "Too bad… Maybe the Magpies would be worth looking at, though…"

"Yes!" Zabini yelled. "Best team there is."

Daphne sighed under her breath in a defeated sort of way and turned

to speak quietly with Parkinson, who also looked a bit annoyed. Harry barely noticed them though, and certainly none of the other boys did. Talking with these Slytherins about the teams in the League was surprisingly easy. Harry supposed that if anything would bridge the gap between him and them, it would be Quidditch—one of the few topics in the wizarding world that he could hold his own on.

He was so engaged, in fact, that Harry didn't even realize when the waiter had popped in to refill their drinks—he only noted passively that his glass was suddenly full again for a moment before being immediately distracted by a ridiculous point Malfoy had tried to make about how to correctly perform a Sloth Grip Roll.

And Malfoy, he noted, was quite the conflicted individual. All throughout the night his magic would ebb and flow, transitioning between pleased and annoyed when Harry would talk. He was both happy *and* irritated whenever Harry said something that garnered a laugh or made a valid point, effectively 'fitting in' with his supposed friends. It was like he couldn't decide if he was glad that his plan seemed to be working or disappointed. Envious, it seemed, of how easily Harry seemed to be winning them over.

Harry supposed Draco Malfoy always had been jealous of him.

It wasn't until half-past nine that Harry finally noticed the time. *Hours* had passed, and now that he bothered to look about him, it was obvious. The club was beginning to fill out more—there were at least twenty more people sitting at other tables, their magical auras glimmering, and the bars were much busier. Even the music had transitioned to a faster, livelier beat.

More troubling was that even though Harry had been ignorant, that was not the case for these newcomers. It seemed that everyone realized he was there. Harry had been famous long enough to notice, to see their quick glances and the way they whispered to each other, thinking they were much more discrete than they were.

Harry made eye contact with a young witch, whose magic immediately flared with alarm. She winced and looked away, then shook the arm of the wizard next to her. Harry turned his attention back to Nott before he could stare at him too, who was still going on about Puddlemore United's last, legendary Keeper that sadly retired years ago.

Harry's heart was beginning to race. More witches and wizards were

pouring in, and he was rapidly going from feeling oddly at ease to highly uncomfortable. He drained his half-full glass in one gulp.

“I think we should be going soon,” he murmured, directing his words to Malfoy. He turned to look, and it became clear to him, too, that people were staring at them.

He frowned, but to Harry’s surprise he didn’t argue. “I suppose,” Draco said. “But first!”

He lifted his hand, and immediately the waiter reappeared. “A round of shots for the table,” he said. “Something *good*.”

“Right away, Mr. Malfoy,” he said before disappearing again.

“Oh, shots!” Daphne said, clapping her hands together. “I hope he doesn’t bring us whisky. I *can’t* do whisky.”

“Guess we’ll find out,” Malfoy said. “I’m sure Goyle will take yours if you don’t want it.”

Goyle didn’t agree nor disagree. Harry wasn’t sure how he felt about doing shots—the effects of the firewhisky had him feeling buzzy enough as it was—but if it meant they could leave soon, he supposed he would deal with it.

Nott was staring at Harry with that deeply contemplative look again. Harry could tell he was judging him for wanting to leave at a time he was sure they considered very early, but he didn’t much care about his opinion. All Harry knew was that more and more people were coming in, and while he was probably being at least a *little* paranoid, it felt like everyone was staring. Their auras were shimmering and glowing, and it was all beginning to be too much.

The waiter reappeared. A tray of small glasses was on his tray, full of glowing green liquid that made Harry think uneasily of nuclear acid. They floated from his tray towards each of them.

Most of the Slytherins accepted their glasses without question, but Parkinson hesitated. “What is this?” she asked, her nose wrinkled distastefully as the glass hovered before her.

Well, Harry thought, at least he wasn’t the only one wary of it. He did, at least, pluck his shot out of the air. He had the oddest sense that the glass might start hitting him in the head if he didn’t.

“We call them Venom shots,” the waiter said. “Concocted by our new bartender just a few weeks ago, but quickly becoming a signature here at Cloak and Laurel. They’re made with gin that’s been infused with pixie dust. Also a touch of dittany. Helps stave off any potential hangover.”

“Very good,” Malfoy said. The waiter nodded then, taking the cue to once more vanish.

“Shall we make another toast?” Daphne said once he was gone. She raised her glowing glass. “To Draco, for being the man of the hour? And to the New Regime, perhaps?”

“Yes,” Parkinson said, lifting her glass too. “And to our future endeavors.” She cast Nott a flirtatious smile; Malfoy’s aura darkened and his brows furrowed.

“Cheers to that,” Nott agreed, lifting his glass next.

“To our longstanding and honored traditions,” Malfoy said haughtily, adding his own glass to theirs.

“To the Canons,” Goyle said. Harry caught his eye and grinned.

“Ergh. To every team *but* the Canons,” Zabini drawled as he lifted his.

Which once more left Harry. They stared at him expectantly again, the glowing liquid of their glasses bathing their faces in a vibrant green. Their auras—varying from heavy gray to shimmering pastel—all whirled, waiting to hear what Harry Potter would say.

Harry thought once more of Hermione. What would she do in this situation? What exactly could he say to leave a lasting, powerful impression?

His lips curled as it came to him. Harry raised his glass. “For Voldemort and Valour,” he said.

Their faces all lit up in shock. They glanced at one another questionably, mostly looking towards Malfoy. He swallowed hard, then nodded, looking back to Harry.

“For Voldemort and Valour,” he echoed. Harry was surprised at how he was able to say the Dark Lord’s name without stuttering, despite how his magic shivered.

“For Voldemort and Valour,” the rest repeated—though Goyle seemed to just mouth the word ‘Voldemort’, Harry thought, and Daphne stuttered her way through it.

Before they could clink their glasses together, a recklessness seized Harry. The light of the shots had just caught on Malfoy’s serpent brooch, and the moment the idea crossed his mind, he spoke without thinking it through.

“And to power,” he hissed, the parseltongue slipping from between his lips with ease.

Their auras all froze, and everyone’s jaws dropped—all except Nott, who alone managed to remain looking somewhat dignified. Harry knew they didn’t know what he said, but it didn’t matter. That was the ancient language of Salazar Slytherin he had just spoken in.

There was only one thing they could do in response to that.

Harry smiled and downed his shot. It tasted like tart apple and juniper and yes, there was definitely a note of dittany. After a pause, the rest of them followed his lead—Harry’s lead.

The blood-red flowers were blooming.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, an emotion that was not Harry’s own coiled and stirred.

Reflections

“So when exactly did you get *that*?”

Harry was unsurprised at the question. Draco rounded on him the moment they landed back in the foyer of his manor, his magic blazing in a silvery sheen. Harry didn’t need to ask for clarification on what he meant, either.

It had been impossible to be discreet, retrieving Voldemort’s old wand.

Harry had it stowed away, now. Malfoy was pointing aggressively towards his robe pocket where he had watched Harry hide it.

“Er… recently,” Harry said vaguely.

“Recently? How? And why?”

“Because I’m a perfectly well behaved, pardoned wizard with a right to a wand,” Harry said dully. “I’m a model citizen, in fact.”

“The Dark Lord wouldn’t give you his wand because you were being even slightly less Gryffindor-ish than usual,” Draco said. “You did something. And it must have really pleased him, to reward you like that. He always rewards his followers who impress him... and that’s the *only* time he rewards them.”

Draco moved closer, still pointing at his chest. Harry had half a mind to step back into the fireplace and floo himself out of there, to literally anywhere else.

“What did you do, Potter?” Draco asked again.

Harry swallowed hard, the taste of the Venom shot still strong on his tongue. “Wouldn’t you like to know,” he said as coolly as he could—with absolutely no idea what he was trying to imply. An air of indiscernible mystery, perhaps? It was certainly better than trying to explain anything that had really happened to Draco Malfoy.

“Yeah, of bloody course I would!” Draco shouted, throwing his arms out wide. “That way I can do it, too!”

Harry laughed. “Oh, you’re being serious?” he said when Draco only glared. "As though you could possibly do what I did.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

Harry didn’t know what that was supposed to mean. He pretended otherwise. “Trust me, Draco. If you think for a second that you can pull off anything the way that I do, especially when the Dark Lord is involved, you’re losing your mind.”

Harry pushed past him. His head was buzzing and he desperately wanted to go to his room and lie down.

“Hey!” Draco yelled. “Don’t you dare—”

Harry, unsure of what had suddenly come over him, whirled on the spot. He had Voldemort’s wand—his wand, now—drawn and pointed at Malfoy’s heart.

Draco’s magic withered. He reached for his own wand, but Harry was already a step ahead of him. *Expelliarmus*, he thought, and a flash of red magic soared. It hit Malfoy’s hand just as he pulled out his wand, sending it soaring across the room... towards him.

Harry caught it with the deftness of a Seeker that could play on any team in the League. Draco stared at him, his eyes wide with shock that he was not only disarmed, but that his wand should so willingly go straight into Harry’s free hand. Harry, however, was not shocked at all. Draco’s hawthorn wand felt warm and familiar in his fingers.

Because I’ve already won you, he thought smugly as he looked at it. *This wand is already mine*.

And it wasn’t the only one that he was the rightful Master of.

Harry grinned, flexing his fingers around the yew wand, which was still pointed at Malfoy’s chest.

“Let’s get something cleared up right now,” Harry said. “I may be staying here, acting like your family’s ward, but you aren’t my superior. You want to be friends, or something that even vaguely looks like it to the rest of the wizarding world? Then you can start by changing your strategy. I *know* what real friendship is, and your little tricks at getting me to tolerate you and the people you hang out with won’t work for long. Try being honest with me—it’s what Daphne did, and look? Now we call each other by our first names, and we don’t even do so sarcastically. Try letting me know what you have planned, honestly, so that I can make decisions for myself. I’m a free man, remember?”

Draco, though his magic was quivered in anxiety, glared. “You wouldn’t have come out if you had known they’d be there.”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not,” he said—though he knew perfectly well that Draco was right. “I might surprise you with the choices I’d make, Draco… Here, you can have this back. Again. Consider it another birthday present, eh? I’m going to trust that when I turn around and walk away from you, you won’t make the stupid choice and try and throw a hex at my backside. That’s the sort of behavior that gets you transfigured into a ferret and ruins potential alliances.”

Harry tossed Draco’s wand back to him. Harry didn’t bother to see if he would catch it—he knew he would; Draco may not have been as good a Seeker as him, but he wasn’t bad—and instead did as he said he would. Harry turned and walked away while his wand was in the air, once more leaving a discomforted Draco Malfoy in the foyer of his own home.

“Binny,” Harry called as he walked, ascending the grandiose staircase where he knew Malfoy could still see and hear him clearly. The house-elf appeared at his side on the steps at once.

“Yes, Master Potter?”

“Will you bring something to eat to my room?” he asked, never breaking stride as he spoke. “I’m starved. Something sweet. I would really appreciate it.”

A flash of vibrant, enigmatic magic flared—more house-elf magic, Harry noted. A very satisfied burst of it. Perhaps Binny was pleased to hear that Harry wanted to eat of his own volition.

“At once, Master Potter.”

He disappeared with a slight *pop*. Behind him, Harry could feel Draco’s swirling, conflicted—though mostly angry—magic roil. He imagined that his expression matched his aura, but Harry wasn’t sure. He never looked back to check.

Harry sighed, feeling lazy and content after eating his fill of an impressively delicious dessert that Binny had made. Being full, he realized, really did make a world of difference for his attitude. He had eaten nearly the whole damn cake before asking Binny to take the dishes back, and that tiny elf could not have looked prouder of him.

Harry laid flat on his back, arms splayed wide on top of his fluffy comforter. It was pristinely made, and though he knew that Binny would have happily made his bed for him every morning when he got up, it was Harry who did so. An old habit of living at the Dursleys, he supposed. Aunt Petunia would yell at him if he didn't do it, and she would yell even more if he didn't do it *the right way*. Once he made the dire mistake of arguing that it didn't matter if the bed was made *the right way* or not—he slept in the cupboard under the stairs. No one saw his tiny, dirty bed.

Harry shook the memories of that dark night away. He was not in a cupboard under the stairs now, that was clear. *How the tides have changed,* he thought morbidly.

And how they kept changing…

Harry stared ponderingly at the reflection above him. The past week was beginning to have a visible effect on his body—while he was still skinny, he was not nearly as malnourished as he had been weeks ago. Spending the days outside with Luna and Hagrid, working by planting things by hand, had done wonders for him. For one, it exhausted him, which resulted in an unignorable appetite. His muscles were starting to come back, too, and he even had a bit of a tan, thanks to the lack of shade where they worked and recently warm, sunny weather. If it weren't for his missing glasses and fiercely red eyes, he would look almost like his old self.

But he didn't.

Harry blinked, slowly, then stared in an accusatory fashion at the still-crimson irises that greeted him when he opened his eyes again. What he wouldn't give to have his old eyes back… Sure, the glasses had been annoying, but he didn't care.

That had been all he'd had of his mother.

Harry closed his eyes, not wanting to look at himself any longer. He had other things to focus on.

Voldemort.

His brows furrowed as he tried, with all his might, to reach him. *Where are you?* he thought as fiercely as he could. *Come back.*

Nothing.

Whatever emotion he had felt earlier, it had come and gone rapidly. Just another fleeting moment where Voldemort's defenses had fallen…

What was most confusing for Harry, however, was trying to discern what that emotion had been. The feeling that had unfurled in his chest was unlike any emotion he had felt from the Dark Lord before. It was not rage, nor joy, nor impatience. It was something… else. Something sickening and frantic and almost… loathsome? A bit nauseating even. But it had vanished so quickly that Harry hadn't been able to assess it properly.

Only one thing was certain—whatever that feeling had been, it wasn't good.

Harry turned and glanced at the large clock, noting the time. Half-past eleven…

Would the Dark Lord come at midnight, tonight?

Harry had a distinct feeling that he would. He had already finished doing whatever he needed to do; clearly killing that poor old man had to have been his objective. Tomorrow would mark an entire week since Voldemort had been gone, too. Surely he was going through… withdrawals? Or something like it.

Harry could already imagine it: Voldemort reappearing as he used to, an enigmatic presence manifesting in his bedroom at the stroke of midnight. He probably thought he would surprise Harry, too… but Harry was becoming very good at predicting the Dark Lord's actions. Being able to sense his magic certainly helped. Voldemort could never sneak up on him with that dark yet dazzling aura.

Harry wondered if he should be worried. It had been days and days… and a Dark Lord that had been without his… what? Soul fix? Would assuredly be an unpleasant one.

But maybe not, Harry thought, once more looking at his reflection. Red, red eyes. *Maybe he really will be better. Maybe he really will have learned self-control, after he… after what he did.*

Harry swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly dry. He had been trying not dwell on what happened at the reception… but when he did, it left him feeling far too many confusing emotions. It had all happened so quickly and chaotically. Parts of it he remembered well. Too well. Moving slowly through the thin woods, his eyes closed as he strained to feel Voldemort's magic… the snakes hissing, following him…

Find him…

There had been long, seemingly endless moments of fear, but after that…

It had all been too much. The magic, the emotions, the *feelings*. Harry hadn't had space in his mind for his own emotions, then; Voldemort's had wholly consumed him. It was a want like nothing Harry had ever experienced himself.

It was horrible, what happened.

Horrible.

It may have almost killed him, even.

And yet.

And yet it had been the most viscerally pleasurable experience of his life. Undeniably, irrevocably, horrifically. No, he had not wanted that. He hadn't. But feeling what Voldemort had felt; those intense, contradictory sensations… Reflecting on it filled Harry *himself* with conflicting feelings. He felt his face grow uncomfortably hot, while at the same time, he thought he might be sick.

It was beyond troubling that the former should happen at all.

Harry ran both his hands through his hair, fixing himself with a strained expression in the mirror. Could he possibly be any more fucked up?

"Never again," he said to himself. "That will never, never happen again."

His red-eyed reflection had nothing to add.

Nodding firmly to himself, Harry felt ready. Perhaps irrationally, but still—Harry was ready for whatever version of the Dark Lord would arrive in his room. He felt the yew wand against his chest in his pocket and knew that he was no longer powerless. *Never again. I am in control.*

He took a deep breath and waited, prepared and calm… yet midnight came and went, and Voldemort never came.

He was trembling.

Trembling; feverish and yet cold, so cold.

Had he always been so cold?

He scowled, slamming his fists onto the table and nearly destroying it. His magic. It crackled around him like a storm. It was a familiar, terrible feeling; it was the exact way it had been when he was a mere child with little control and no understanding. When things just happened because he wanted them to.

Bad things.

This… this was what he had been reduced to.

He turned, furious at the truth of it, furious at his inability to change it at once. This was a process and he was in the worst of it now, he knew it—just as he knew that he had no one to blame but himself for being here. He had allowed himself to get to this point… but he would come back from this.

He had come back from far, far worse.

He turned again, fully recognizing that he was pacing. Pacing and trembling. Shaking with *want*…

He *wanted*…

No. No, no. It was *that*, allowing his thoughts to stray, that was undoing him. He only had to keep his mind occupied, and eventually, this would pass.

It was difficult to do so without a demanding task to distract him.

He once more checked the cauldron. A deep, garnet red substance broiled, low bubbles emerging in an unnatural, orderly fashion on its surface. It had to simmer for hours yet. He checked the fire beneath—it was perfect. Of course it was perfect.

Now it was a matter of waiting, and waiting was torture. It gave him nothing to focus on besides why he was waiting. Why he was here. Why he had done all of this; why and how he had gotten here.

He *wanted*…

No.

He wanted to feel it, feel him; to feel that light and that skin, those

lips, that—

No, no, no!

A terrible, angry sound escaped his mouth, unbidden. Magic shimmered about him; the candles all burned twice as bright and the fragile furniture rattled precariously. The fire under the cauldron was no longer perfect. He fixed it with shaking hands.

Control, he told himself. *You are in control…*

He did not want him. The boy was a vessel of his soul, an unfortunate error that he must now protect at all costs, and nothing more. Nothing more. He did not want him, he did not need him; he did not need… that.

He took a deep breath. He was still trembling, but it was getting better. Would get better. Taking a deep breath, he began pacing again.

The mirror caught his attention.

He had been trying to avoid his reflection; his appearance unnerved him even still. He was beautiful. No matter how many times he examined himself after his resurrection—

Using *his* magic; that beautiful, pure, dizzying—

No. No.

…it caught him off guard. Evens still, he expected the pale, hairless creature to greet him in the mirror when he came across one. He feared that it may yet happen again.

A foolish thought to have. He knew the extent of the magic he had performed; he knew what he was. Eternal. Powerful.

Perfect.

He approached the mirror. He was…

No.

What he saw in the mirror was neither himself nor the monster.

“No!” he shouted, taking a trembling, haphazard step away from the traitorous silver. It could not be. *It could not be.*

Was this madness?

He looked back at cursed eyes as red as his own; staring, staring.

“Leave me!”

He would not give in. He would not.

A wordless cry that was far more vicious than any sound he had ever made tore through the air. Magic whirled; dark, violent, uncontrolled. The fragile furniture snapped and that traitorous mirror, that traitorous mirror—he screamed—

Harry screamed.

Shards of glass rained down, sharp slivers spilling out of the sky and onto the sheets, his hair, his skin. Magic was everywhere, surrounding him. It broke everything it touched. A thousand red eyes in pieces of glass fell about him and they were staring, staring.

Harry screamed a scream that was not his own and broke the sky.

“Master Potter! Master Potter!”

The glass had not even settled around him yet when Binny appeared. Harry sat up, stifling the scream and drawing in a ragged breath. His palms slammed down onto the glass-covered sheets at his sides, drawing blood.

“Master Potter!” Binny cried again. “Is you okay?”

A dream, he’d been having a dream. Such a *realistic* dream; something to do with… a mirror, he thought…

It was already gone. Harry was left only with the vague, distorted memory of being enraged, seeing his reflection in a dream, and then screaming.

“Y-yeah,” he answered, though his heart raced. “Yeah, I just… had a nightmare.”

He looked around at his bed. The mirror above him had completely shattered; it surrounded him now in a thousand tiny fragments. He had done that…?

“A really bad one, I guess.” Harry lifted his bloody palms and winced.

“I is fixing this, Master Potter,” Binny said. He raised his little arms, and all at once the glass shards began floating upward, slowly. Harry watched in awe as they came together, mending seamlessly until, just moments later, it was once more whole.

Then he was at Harry’s side on the bed, motioning towards him expectantly. “Your hands, Master,” he said.

Harry didn’t hesitate. He held his bloody palms out, and with a flash of almost imperceptible magic, Binny healed him. He even vanished the blood in the same stroke.

“You’re amazing. You know that, don’t you Binny?”

Binny stood tall and looked very proud. “I is a good house-elf.”

“The very best.”

“Would master Potter be liking a Dreamless Draught, perhaps?” Binny asked. “To not be having another bad dream…?”

It was past four in the morning, Harry now saw. If he was going to continue to get stronger, not weaker, he needed to sleep well at least some nights. And that nightmare must have been pretty… well, nightmarish, to cause him to shatter the glass canopy like that. He looked up at the mirror and frowned. It was probably the cause of his nightmare, that cursed thing.

“Sure,” he said. “And actually… Binny, do you think you could do me one more favor?”

“Of course, Master Potter. Anything you like, Master Potter.”

“Could you vanish this mirror? I think it might be what’s giving me nightmares, truth be told.”

Harry was surprised when Binny did not immediately and willingly comply. Instead, his ears drooped. “I… I is not sure, Master Potter,” he said. “The furniture in Malfoy Manor is very old, very historic—Binny is not sure if Binny can be vanishing anything; Mistress Narcissa might be—”

“It’s fine,” Harry said, cutting him off. “Totally fine. I can deal with it. Maybe I’ll just ask Narcissa if I can have a different room tomorrow or something.”

Binny relaxed. “I will be bringing you a Draught, Master,” he said. Then he vanished with a *pop*.

Master. Harry wasn’t sure what alarmed him more—how often Binny called him that now, or the fact that he found himself getting rather used to it.

Harry looked at the mirrored ceiling of the four-post bed and glared—a glower which was quite formidable, given his scarlet eyes and wild hair. “You are the bane of my existence,” he muttered at it.

His reflection stopped mimicking to give him what Harry thought was a rather wicked smile. “Such *lies*,” it said.

Harry’s mouth was still hanging open when Binny reappeared.

“Here is your—is you okay, Master Potter?”

The mirror had resumed mimicking him perfectly.

“I… yeah,” Harry said, thought he felt far from it. “Never better. Thanks for that.”

He took the cup from Binny’s hands, which was filled with a familiar, lavender-smelling potion. He didn’t think twice before downing all its contents.

“Is there anything else you is needing, Master?” Binny asked, taking the empty cup from him.

“No, thank you, Binny... Good night.”

“Good night, Master Potter.”

Binny vanished. Harry fell back onto his pillow, watching his now very compliant and normal reflection. He hated magical mirrors. He hated *this* magical mirror. He hated this reflection in this magical mirror in particular. Was it the same as the one in the vanity? Were all magical mirror reflections the same, or were they all different? Were all of those different versions of himself actually him, or were they something—someone—else? Harry’s mind boggled.

He didn’t have long to dwell on all it all. Soon the Dreamless Draught took hold, and Harry was fast asleep.

The Forest Again

It could not have been a more beautiful day. The sun was shining and Harry could hear birds singing on the other side of one of the cracked, open windows, through which the aroma of flowers also came wafting in. He longed to leave right away, to head to Hagrid's as soon as he was ready… but there were formalities that had to be addressed first.

Harry smiled as pleasantly as he could and helped himself to a scone.

Across from him, Narcissa stirred some sugar into her tea cup with a small, silver spoon, blowing on it before lifting it to her lips. Just one spoonful of sugar, nothing else. To his right, Draco had not yet gotten to tea and went straight for some bacon that Binny had set before them. To Harry's left was Lucius, who had hidden himself and his black—nothing added, no sugar, no cream—tea behind *The Daily Prophet,* as usual.

Breakfast with the Malfoys. Harry hated that this had become his routine.

He looked at the newspaper which Lucius held, its cover splayed before him. June 8th, 1998. The headline was particularly unwelcome today: *MUGGLE-BORN REGISTRATION NUMBERS CONTINUE TO ESCALATE* was written in big, bold letters.The accompanying photograph of a very pleased looking Dolores Umbridge did not make the article any more palatable.

Harry glared at her moving image, at the way she smiled her toad-like smile and waved her stubby fingers which were covered in too many rings. It was unfortunately true that Voldemort's plan was working. More and more muggle-borns were coming out of the woodwork, appearing to register at the Ministry where they would be forced to pledge their fealty to the new regime, to denounce their muggle relatives. Then, if they did submit, they would unwittingly have their emotions for their loved ones wiped.

And if they didn't, well…

Were they going to Azkaban? Harry could only assume that was the case. He could practically *feel* his blood pressure rise as he continued to watch how happy Umbridge looked with herself in the photo. He bet that she sent those poor muggle-borns off to life with dementors with that very same, twisted smile on her face.

The moment Voldemort returned, Harry was going to make a number of demands. Those who were unfairly imprisoned in Azkaban were at the top of his list.

"Mother, I'm going to go into Diagon Alley today for a bit of shopping," Draco said, interrupting his thoughts. Harry tore his eyes away from *The Daily Prophet* and went back to eating his scone. "Is there anything you need me to pick up while I am out?"

Narcissa smiled at him fondly. "No, thank you Draco."

"Of course," Draco said. His silvery magic became brighter, almost excited. "Would you like to go with me, Harry?"

Harry didn't think it would ever sound natural, Draco Malfoy calling him by his first name. He also didn't think this was a very inventive way to try and get him to be his friend. Going shopping with Draco sounded less exciting than going with Narcissa, and much less fun than going to Hagrid's. "Er, no," he said. "Thanks."

"Really? That's a shame," Draco said as he held his cup to the side. Binny filled it with tea and a touch of cream. Just the way he liked it. "I was going to go to Quality Quidditch Supplies… I thought it was about time I upgraded my old Nimbus 2001… thought about getting myself a Firebolt."

He took a sip of his drink, acting as though he had not noticed the way Harry suddenly sat up straight.

Harry recalled with a horrible, gut-wrenching sadness what happened to his Firebolt. His precious broom, given to him by his Godfather, plummeting to the earth as he and Hagrid went barreling forward on his enchanted motorcycle… Gone forever, gone in the same night he had lost Hedwig and Moody…

But his Firebolt, his ability to fly… that, at least, he could replace. Surely Hagrid and Luna would not be upset if he came later this afternoon instead?

Draco's lips twitched as he watched Harry out of the corner of his eye. "Thought that might be something you were interested in. But if you aren't, then—"

"I'm coming," Harry said. He stood, uncaring that he'd barely eaten. "Let's go."

Draco didn't seem to mind not finishing breakfast, either. He drank his entire cup of tea in one long gulp and stood as well, his magic bright with triumph. "Right then, we're off."

Lucius looked at his son over the top of his newspaper. "Only the Firebolt, Draco," he said sternly, telling Harry that this was a matter they had already been settled. "No other frivolous spending."

"Of course, father."

Narcissa pursed her lips, looking conflicted. Her magic was also torn—it fluctuated in an uneasy way.

Draco must have noticed, for rather than wait for her to say something, he headed towards the fireplace. Harry followed suit at once. "Be careful!" she called after them.

"Yes, mother," Draco said tiredly over his shoulder.

"We will see you this evening, Narcissa," Harry said, much more politely. Because dinner with the Malfoys was also a part of his routine these days. At least he was granted the luxury of lunch with Hagrid, away from this manor. "Thank you for breakfast, Binny!"

Lucius scowled at Harry's compliment to a house-elf and disappeared behind the paper again. Narcissa smiled forlornly at them as they went as though it pained her not to follow. And Binny, looking happy to have received Harry's praise, bowed them out as Draco shouted "The Leaky Cauldron, Diagon Alley!" into the fireplace, scattering floo powder and disappearing in a plume of green flames with Harry quickly following.

Draco had disobeyed his father's command to not buy anything other than a Firebolt almost the moment they'd entered the store, but Harry wasn't complaining. Less than two hours had passed before they *each* had a shiny new Firebolt in their possession, as well as one critical additional item, all courtesy of the Malfoy family's ridiculously large fortune.

The day out had been oddly fun, so much so that Harry was able to forget the way people shied away from him while simultaneously staring. And Draco Malfoy, he supposed, but Draco seemed comfortable with the attention. Harry shouldn't have been surprised. Draco had always wanted fame, and he had been jealous of Harry from day one because he had always had it without ever intentionally

doing a thing.

Except Quidditch, Harry reminded himself as he gripped the handle of his new broom. Flying was his one claim to fame that he had earned, based on his own natural skill… and he planned to remind Draco Malfoy of that fact very soon.

“Should have bought a Snitch years ago,” Draco said, holding the small, wooden box it had come in as though it was a great prize. Which it was. “A Firebolt as well. Far superior to the Nimbus 2001. It turns so quickly, it almost—”

“Are we doing this or what?”

Draco didn’t look affronted at Harry’s sudden interruption. “Of course. If you’re ready, that is. Are you? Sure you don’t need another go around the yard?”

“Unlike you, Malfoy, I’ve been flying a Firebolt for a while now. I don’t need the practice.”

“Fine. Just remember the rules. Thirty seconds until take off. I have the charm set. And please…”

He held the wooden box out with his left hand, his right hand hovering over it, ready to pry the lid off.

“…Call me Draco.”

He opened the box. The snitch within came to life, its wings unfurling in a flash before it was gone, off to fly about the manor’s vast yard as far as the warding would allow.

Draco dropped the box and reached into his pocket, pulling out his wand. He murmured the incantation under his breath, and a wisp of blue-gray magic came from the tip, forming an ethereal, glowing clock. It contained only a second hand, and already it was counting down.

Draco mounted his broom. Harry had already done so, and he readjusted his grip, ready. His heart was speeding as though this was not some meaningless grudge match between old rivals but a real Quidditch game.

“Sure you don’t want to make things interesting?” Harry asked again. “I’d love to have you as a personal slave for a day.”

Draco glared, but he was smiling. His magic was glowing and buoyant, and Harry could tell—he was excited. He was having fun. With Harry Potter. “I’ll be satisfied with the knowledge that I’ve beaten you,” he said.

“Spoil sport.”

Twenty seconds left. Harry watched the glowing clock, ready to take off the moment it counted down.

“No cheating and taking off early,” Harry warned.

Draco’s magic glinted. “I would never dream of cheating.”

The seconds ticked down. Five, four, three…

The second it hit zero, Harry and Draco both kicked from the ground. The glowing clock dispersed behind them… and the game had begun.

Stupid of me, really, Harry thought as he now surveyed the grounds outside Malfoy Manor. Rather than stare at that magical clock, he should have been looking for the Snitch, to see where it had gone…

But Draco has been staring as intently at the clock as he had, so at least he knew that they were on the same level. Neither of them knew where it had gone, and so it was as fair a game as it could be.

It was odd, Harry thought, playing Seeker vs. Seeker when there was no actual game going on. No quaffle, no announcer to describe what the Chasers were doing, no bludgers to watch out for…

What had the young Riddle called it in that memory? Just… *noise.*

There was no *noise* whatsoever to distract them from the only goal that had ever mattered to either of them: the Snitch.

Unfortunately, this made it difficult to be sneaky as well. Harry learned quickly how important that *noise* was in a real game of Quidditch after all. Without it, Draco had nothing to distract him from keeping an eye on Harry, and vice versa. They spent as much time watching each other as they did looking for the Snitch, which had a huge span in the manor’s many gardens and yards to fly and hide.

Is this what happens in war? Harry found himself thinking. He kept half his focus on Draco, who was hovering over the sparse woods by the gates, while he hunted for the Snitch above the rose garden. Was most

of what happened—the battles, the plots, the politics—was it mostly just *noise?* Small wins in comparison to what the real goal was: utter and complete victory?

He saw it.

Hovering near the ground, above one particularly thorny rose bush.

Harry dove.

The moment he started soaring downward, Draco was on him. Harry grinned widely as he flew, the rush of going full speed straight towards the earth giving him a familiar, amazing rush. There was also the familiar feeling of knowing that he was going to win. He was much closer to the Snitch than Draco was; there was not a chance that he was going to catch up to him.

As though to prove him wrong, the Snitch took off as Harry approached, going straight towards Draco. Harry caught sight of Draco's face, which had lit up in excitement at the turn of events. He sped onwards, as did Harry, and they were going fast, too fast, right towards each other—the Snitch wasn't moving and they were going to collide—

"AHHH!"

Draco pulled out and went spiraling away right at the last moment, just as Harry knew he would, barely avoiding what surely would have been a nasty collision. Harry, however, had never stopped. As Draco turned Harry kept going straight, arm extended, and he let out a triumphant cry as his fingers wrapped around the fluttering, golden orb.

"YES!"

Harry did several barrel rolls once he'd caught it, whooping in delight. There was no feeling quite like catching a Snitch right from under Draco Malfoy's nose.

"You're insane!" Draco shouted at him. "Mental! You would have crashed right into me!"

"But I knew *you* wouldn't crash into *me,"* Harry said, smirking. "A hundred and fifty points to Gryffindor."

"Get over yourself," Draco snarled. "And follow me back to the

ground. We're going again."

Smiling more broadly still, Harry happily obliged.

The next few days passed in what Harry might have been tempted to describe as 'pleasantly'.

With a broom in his possession, he had actually begun to enjoy spending moderate amounts of time with Draco. They sometimes played with the Snitch, and other times practiced with a Quaffle after Harry suggested they make goal hoops to play on. Draco had some installed the very next morning, and while Harry still preferred seeking to chasing and keeping, it was fun to switch it up.

What he really couldn't wait for was for Ron to come back. He and Hermione were supposed to return on Sunday, just a couple days away, and then he would have his real friends to spend time with again. He had already decided he was going to buy Ron a Firebolt for his wedding present, and then the two of them could take on Draco together.

In the meantime, however, Draco was… well, tolerable. He really was doing his best to endear himself to Harry, no longer pressing him on issues such as how he acquired the Dark Lord's wand or anything else of that nature, and when he told Harry that he was inviting his peers over for drinks that Saturday evening, asking if the infamous Harry Potter would grace them with his presence, Harry obliged.

Yet even as the days came and went, filled with flying and Hagrid's and quality time with Luna and Fang, Harry always harbored a dark sense of foreboding in the back of his mind.

Where in the world was Voldemort?

He had been gone for far too long. Surely he was in terrible withdrawal? How was he able to deal with that for so long? And what was he doing, anyway?

That terrified old man… who had he been?

These thoughts kept Harry up at night, where he would lay on his bed and curse himself for always forgetting to ask Narcissa if he could move to a new room. He would relive the way the mirror had shattered and fallen down around him, the result of a terrible nightmare, no doubt.

He was staring at it again now, looking up into his red eyes as they narrowed, focusing on himself. At least he looked healthier in every other aspect. He continued to be able to eat normally since Voldemort left, and working outside with Hagrid and Luna continued to do wonders for his mental and physical health.

Or maybe it's the flying, Harry thought, casting his Firebolt a fond look where he kept it leaning against the wall. There was truly nothing better than flying to chase away all worries and anxieties. Although always being around Draco Malfoy when he was doing it did put a damper on things…

Harry sat bolt upright, a seemingly genius idea coming to him.

Draco Malfoy wasn't around now.

No one was around now, not even the Dark Lord. It was late, well past midnight—everyone in the manor would be asleep. And he had been behaving so well lately; surely no one would expect it, not now… He could easily be back before sunrise…

And there was something he had been meaning to do. Something he had to do completely alone, without the watchful eyes of Hagrid, Luna, and certainly not Draco; nor did he want Ron or Hermione to know… with the Dark Lord still absent, this would probably be his best opportunity. Perhaps his only opportunity. Tomorrow Draco's friends would be here, and Ron and Hermione would return the next day… and who knew when Lord Voldemort might reappear?

Grinning deviously, Harry tossed his blankets aside, stood, and threw on his robes. He then grabbed his Firebolt and put his Invisibility Cloak over his shoulders before leaving his room… and Malfoy Manor.

Now this, Harry thought, *feels like freedom.*

Invisible to anyone—not that there would have been many to see him out here, anyway—Harry soared through the warm, June night air, feeling free as a bird. The mostly full moon was glowing gently, and the cloudless night allowed the stars to glitter beautifully across the sky. Harry imagined that the centaurs were probably predicting things right now, and he was suddenly glad that he was, in fact, invisible.

The castle in the distance was a dark, mysterious monument, no lights flickering from within its enchanted—and currently shambled—walls. Renovations were set to start soon, Harry knew, but so far Hogwarts

had remained untouched. The stars twinkled around it, bright and luminous…

Do you see it, Harry Potter? Do you see the stars, how they shine in my name?

It was tempting, very tempting, to try and break into the castle right then, to wander its halls and maybe, Harry thought, go to the Headmaster's office…

If he could get in there, he could speak to the portrait of Dumbledore...

Harry shoved that wild thought aside. He imagined that there were spells in place that would alert the Ministry if anyone tried breaking into Hogwarts before repairs began, and besides, that wasn't why he was here.

Harry turned and flew lower, heading towards the Forbidden Forest.

In the distance, he saw Hagrid's hut, knowing that he and Fang were sleeping inside. Rather than head in that direction, towards the clearing where he had been nearly every day recently, Harry went the opposite way. Deeper into the forest.

When he was pretty certain he was close, Harry lowered himself further, nimbly making his way down between some tall, thick trees before touching the ground. He stowed his broom on his back and, still under the cloak, retracted his wand. It was dark down here, very dark. The trees blocked out most of the light of the moon and stars. And although Harry knew it was a risk to conjure light—the forest was full of dangerous things, especially at night—he knew he had no choice. He needed to see what he was doing now.

"Lumos."

Light burst forth from the tip of his wand. Harry promptly got to work.

The clearing was just ahead; it had to be somewhere around here… somewhere very close, he was sure… Summoning it, he was certain, would not work. He could only hope nothing else in the forest had found it, first…

Luck was on his side for once. Less than fifteen minutes of searching later, Harry found it. A gold, glinting thing in the grass.

Holding his breath, Harry sunk to his knees beside it. He picked it up warily, like he feared it might be a mirage and disappear the moment he touched it. He grinned when it did not, weighing heavily in his palm as he closed his fingers around it.

The Gaunt ring. A Peverell heirloom. A destroyed horcrux.

And, most importantly, the Resurrection Stone.

Harry held it to his chest as he stood, continuing on through the woods. He waited until he entered the familiar, horrible clearing before he removed his cloak and examined it properly.

The crack was as evident as it had been before. It was a wonder, Harry thought, that it could have been destroyed beyond magical repair, and yet still work as a hallow.

Holding it to his chest again, Harry surveyed the clearing before him. There was still a pyre there, a large stack of wood that had once been ignited, surrounded by Death Eaters as Lord Voldemort had stood on the other side of the flames. Still as a statue, his hands folded in front of him… Waiting, waiting for Harry Potter…

Harry's heart was pounding as he once more examined the ring. The truth was that he had been thinking of retrieving it ever since he had first come to Hagrid's. He had already been given his cloak back, and now, now he had the ring…

Two hallows…

He could see his mother again. Really see her, and his father, and Sirius and Remus… He could talk to them, ask their advice, for their guidance…

But it was his mother he longed to see most of all.

Harry closed his eyes and turned the stone. Once, twice, three times…

Something shifted behind him. Heart still beating fast, Harry hesitated before turning to face her.

"Mother?" he said tentatively.

A beat of profound silence.

"Guess again."

No.

Harry's racing heart froze. At the sound of *that* voice, Harry could feel the blood drain from his face, leaving him cold with shock.

He whipped around. He raised his wand high, scattering light in that direction.

No.

Severus Snape looked as unhappy to see him in death as he had in life.

The deceased Potions Master tilted his semi-translucent head to one side slightly, appraising his least favorite ex-student of all time. He looked as perturbed as he always had when surveying Harry Potter: like he was already exacerbated at the notion of needing to deal with him.

"What mess have you gotten yourself into this time, Potter?"

Reunions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“No.”

Harry shook his head, refusing to believe what he saw before him. “No, no, no,” he repeated. “No…”

The ghost—or whatever it was—of Severus Snape did not look amused. “I am equally displeased. I much prefer being dead.”

And just like that, Harry was reliving it.

Severus Snape, bleeding profusely from the wounds in his neck left by Nagini. Severus Snape, pulling memories from his mind into a vessel that Hermione alone had retained the wits to conjure in time. Severus Snape, dying, yet still fighting for the Order as his blood pooled on the wooden floor of the Shrieking Shack.

Harry remembered the way his dark eyes had bored into his for what he thought was the last time.

Look at me.

Lily’s eyes, green and bright, alive in her son…

But not anymore.

As they stood there, staring at one another in the forest, Harry knew that Snape was reliving it as well. His death, the memories he had shared, how intimate and horrible those final moments had been… How Harry had obliged, allowing Snape to stare into his eyes until they could see no longer…

It was not the sort of departure that either of them imagined would include a follow-up meeting, that was for certain.

Harry, feeling equal parts embarrassed, ashamed, and generally uncomfortable, looked down at the grass. “I didn’t summon you. I didn’t ask… I didn't expect…” He nervously ran his hand through his hair before finishing, saying, “I didn’t ask for you.”

“How unfortunate for both of us, then, that the world does not revolve around the wants of Harry James Potter," Snape drawled.

Harry repressed a scowl. “How are you here?” he asked, holding up the ring. “How does this thing work? Does it only bring back the person the user most recently saw die or something…?”

“I do not make the rules of resurrecting the dead… whether they like to be resurrected or not.”

“I thought it was supposed to bring back the people I *wanted* to see. I *wanted* to see my…”

Harry’s voice trailed off, for Snape’s face had become strained. He realized why, of course. Harry had wanted to see his mother, not his former professor who had done nothing but despise him… who also happened to be the woman Snape had been in love with.

“Well… you can’t exactly blame me for asking for her, can you?” said Harry softly.

Surprisingly, Snape did not look upset in the slightest. “No,” he said, and his face became emotionless again. “I cannot.”

There was an awkward stretch of quietness. The sounds of crickets and other insects filled Harry’s ears, making him feel even more unsure of how to proceed.

Snape was just… staring. Looking right into Harry’s no-longer green eyes. He didn’t seem angry or sad or anything at all. His pallid face was blank and that, somehow, was worse than any emotion.

“I’m… I’m sorry,” Harry eventually said. “I’m sorry that you died like that. It was… awful. And not the way you should have gone.”

Snape didn’t react to his apology. He only continued to stare.

“Er… How does this thing work, then?” Harry tried again, unable to think of anything else to say.

“I failed to teach you the most basic principles of potions, Potter… I daresay explaining the intricacies of Death would also be beyond my abilities.”

Harry grimaced, but also felt his lips twitching with the threat of a smile. That sounded much more like the professor he knew, and that

made him feel a bit better. “That’s not entirely true,” Harry said. “You actually taught me loads about potions… in book form, at least. As the Half-Blood Prince.”

He did smile, then. Snape, however, did not seem to find it funny. His eyes narrowed into a glare.

Harry cleared his throat. “So, did you choose to come, or…?”

“Death is not a choice,” Snape said, his face slipping back into something vacant. “And returning… I believe I already made it quite clear that I did not choose to return here, so do not imply that I did. I simply… was. Here.”

“Where were you before?”

“Nowhere. In one moment, I was dying. In the next, I was nowhere. Suspended. Then I was here, summoned to you. I did not have a choice… but then again, no one exactly asked me, either.”

Harry was shocked. “But how? And why?” he asked, shaking his head. “Why weren’t you given a choice? Didn’t you… I dunno, *go on* after you died? Because if you did, then—”

“No,” Snape cut in. His voice was quiet but firm. “I went nowhere. Don’t you understand? I did not go on.”

“What do you mean, you didn’t go on? I thought wizards either became ghosts or went on to whatever is next. I didn’t realize there were… I dunno, other options.”

“Don’t be so simple-minded,” Snape said bitterly. “Death is not some giant party where everyone who has died and chooses to go on gets to see each other again forever. So no, I did not see your parents or anyone else you know who has died, so do not ask me. I saw no one and nothing. I was suspended.” He paused, looking thoughtful. “Waiting. It felt very clearly like I was waiting for something.”

“For what?”

“For this, I suppose. Seeing as I am now here, I can only deduce that this is why I have not gone on to whatever the fate is that awaits most of us. My death was not complete because I had more yet to do… I was to be brought back here… to deal with Harry Potter.”

Snape looked disgusted with himself for coming to this conclusion.

Harry swallowed hard, also doing his best to accept this possibility. "Why, though?" he asked yet again. "Why would it be your… fate, I guess? To be brought here to me? Like this?"

Snape fixed him with a look he knew well—it was the same look he had given Harry many times when he was alive, when Harry had dared to ask a question in class. A look like he, Harry, was the stupidest person to ever live.

"I wonder," Snape said. "Why might it be beneficial for Harry Potter, who is seeking guidance in dealing with the darkest wizard of all time, to receive counsel from me, Severus Snape? The one man who successfully deceived and manipulated him for years?"

Harry felt light-headed as a realization crashed over him.

"I *wonder,*" Snape repeated snidely.

Harry took a step to the side, leaning against a nearby tree. Snape's eyes went to his wand, which was Voldemort's wand, staring at it intensely. Harry closed his eyes and allowed himself a moment. He then took a deep breath and forced himself to voiced his fears.

"When I saw… when I summoned my parents, and Remus and Sirius… they seemed to just… know. What I had been going through. What I had yet to do," he said, speaking slowly.

Harry opened his eyes. Snape's own were black and emotionless, fixated on him.

"What do you know?" Harry asked in a whisper.

"Unfortunately," Snape said, "I am tied to you. I therefore know… what you know."

Harry nearly vomited.

The reaction overtook him suddenly and violently—he bent over, retching and dry-heaving onto the grass. The nausea was so great that he thought he might simply pass out. Which may have been a blessing, because it would have meant delaying this inevitable conversation at least a little longer.

Sadly, Harry did not pass out, nor did he actually vomit. Snape waited as Harry gathered himself.

“You know,” Harry said. “About me, and…”

Snape nodded.

Harry was almost sick all over again.

Snape was less patient this time, making a disgusted sound as Harry’s stomach churned and he once more leaned against a tree for support, doubled over. “You are wasting time, Potter,” Snape said. “What’s done is done. You can only move forward. You now have the choice to do so with my help, or not… so *choose* .”

Harry, still slumped against the tree, glowered at him. “Oh, like now? Right now?” he snapped. “Sorry, didn't realize how pressed you were for time. Do you have other appointments with idiots who might unwillingly resurrect you lined up after this one? No? Then give me a *fucking* minute.”

He slowly sunk to the ground, his back against the tree and his—once Voldemort’s—glowing wand held tightly in his trembling hand.

If what Snape was saying was true, and Harry knew it was… then he knew…

He knew everything.

He knew exactly how Harry had managed to lose his green eyes; he knew about how his soul bond with Lord Voldemort had evolved… He knew that he and the Dark Lord, the wizard he hated more than anyone, who had killed Harry’s mother, had…

The violent kiss. The vanity. The wedding reception.

Snape knew about it all.

After several long, agonizing moments in which Harry sat on the forest floor and the phantom of Snape stood there, waiting, Harry spoke. “How are you even able to look at me?” he finally asked. “If you know… if you know about… everything.”

Snape tilted his head very slightly to one side. “Death… changes you, as you might imagine,” he replied. “Emotions… I remember them. Vaguely. But I no longer have them.”

When Harry gaped at him, Snape made a gesture that was somewhat reminiscent of a shrug. “Death is numbing,” he explained. “Alive, fully

alive, I am certain I would be explosive with rage. As it is… I feel next to nothing. I only know what happened. I know that all of what happened to you after my death was beyond horrendous. And I know that I can help you in ways that others could not."

"You don't feel… anything?" Harry asked. "At all?"

Snape frowned. "I would not say that," he said. "I feel… echoes. Much like how one recalls memories after they have been removed and placed in a Pensieve or elsewhere. Still present, but a mere ghost of what they once were."

Like you are now, Harry thought but didn't say. He imagined that Snape would not appreciate the joke.

"Okay…" Harry said as he considered all of this. He supposed it made sense. If the story about the Peverell brothers was true, that lined up. The second brother had succeeded in bringing back a part of his former lover, but she had not been whole.

She had been a shell of her former self, the story went… One who knew she did not truly belong in the world of the living and was forlorn because of it…

Snape certainly looked that way now. Unhappy. Bitter. Out of place and tragic.

A hollow laugh came out of Harry's mouth before he could stop it. Snape's vacant eyes widened at the sound. "Sorry," Harry said, a strange smile on his face. "It's just… Snape. I wanted my parents or my Godfather and I got Snape. An emotionless, super unhappy… Snape."

He laughed again. Snape, glaring again, moved towards him.

"Do you find this funny, Potter?" he asked, sounding angrier than he had yet. He made very little noise when he moved, Harry noticed. Barely a sound. "Do you think this is a great joke, the predicament you now find yourself in? You are no longer in a clear-cut situation where you are fighting a war, knowing your task and fighting towards that goal; you have *lost* the war. Whether you like to admit it or not, you are a hostage and forever will be while he lives, because *you are his horcrux*. You have been playing a game more dangerous than I believe you can even comprehend, and if you continue to play it the way that you have been, you will lose."

He drew nearer still, now only a few feet in front of where Harry sat. Not liking the feeling of being advanced on while on the ground at all —it was a situation he'd found himself in far too often anymore— Harry forced himself up.

"I've been doing the best I can," Harry spat. "Everything I've done so far—*everything*—has been to keep those I care about safe. And I think I've been doing pretty well, all things considered."

Snape stopped. He was close enough now for Harry to see the way his skin looked in the light of his wand—sallower than it usually was, and there were deep, blue bags under his eyes.

And there was no magical aura surrounding him, Harry suddenly realized. No pinpricks of light and colors to illuminate him, proof that he was not just a man but a being full of magic, a wizard.

There was nothing around him but cold, empty air.

"Is that what you think?" Snape said quietly. "That you have been doing *well*…? The fact that you have managed to keep Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley alive is borderline miraculous. Your decisions have otherwise been, on the whole, horrendous. You've placed an enormous target on the back of Ginevra Weasley that will never disappear. You have made yourself both an object of fascination and repulsion for the Dark Lord that will end in the demise of many people if you don't start to tread more carefully and treat him with respect."

"Respect?" Harry said. "I already told him what I'll tell you about that. Respect is earned. I'll treat him with it when he deserves it. Which will be exactly never, as far as I am concerned."

Snape shook his head, looking not angry, but… disappointed, perhaps. "It is that impetuous attitude that resulted in the death of Neville Longbottom," he said coldly.

An angry, wordless snarl left Harry's mouth without his consent. He threw the ring, hard, directly towards Snape's head, but it collided with nothing. The moment the ring had left his hand, Snape disappeared. Harry was abruptly and wholly alone once more.

Harry swore, uncaring of the fact that he was in the Forbidden Forest at night. He kicked the tree he had been using for support and swore again, a horrid anger swelling in his chest. A flurry of red sparks flew from his wand tip, furious lights that might have caught something on

fire if the foliage had been drier.

How dare he, Harry thought furiously. He found the ring a moment later but did not pick it up. He glared at it where it lay, a lone, glittering, broken thing.

Harry guessed that was how it worked, then. He had to turn it three times, then keep contact with it for the person he summoned to remain with him. He supposed that made sense. Harry imagined that the Peverell brother who made it did so in a way that was convenient. He could turn it then put it on, ensuring physical contact without any effort. Then, if he wanted the phantom to disappear for a time—for who wanted to have the company of a dead lover… or whoever, every moment of the day?—he could simply take the ring off, and the phantom would vanish.

Testing this theory, Harry slowly picked the ring up again. He whipped around, looking for any signs of a person manifesting. No one did.

I guess that means he won't come back unless I turn the stone three times again, Harry concluded. *Great. He can just stay… suspended, or whatever. Maybe forever.*

Even as he had the putrid thoughts, Harry knew this would not be the case. There was too much truth to what Snape had said. He could be a huge help to him, uncomfortable though the alliance may be.

For who better to assist him in manipulating the Dark Lord successfully than Snape?

Harry shoved the ring in his pocket. *Doesn't mean I need to talk to him tonight though*, he thought. He pulled his broom from his back and donned his cloak. *Or for a while, for that matter… fucking prick.*

"*Knox*," Harry muttered. He then stowed his no-longer glowing wand in his pocket, mounted his broom, and took off into the night. It was late, he saw once he was no longer under the cover of the trees. So late that it was early. The sun was beginning to rise, coloring the sky with faint pinks and golds.

Do you see how the blush in the sky foretells of a new dawn, a better dawn… my *dawn… Do you see, Harry?*

Frowning, Harry shook the voice of Lord Voldemort from his mind and made his way back to Malfoy Manor.

Perhaps, if his mind wasn't so preoccupied and he wasn't feeling so worn, he would have noticed sooner.

Maybe, if his thoughts weren't racing and he wasn't so clouded with emotions—anger at what Snape had said to him, shock that he had been confronted with Snape in the first place; horror that this was *Snape* and he was somehow back in his life but only now he knew everything—Harry would have picked up on it right away.

As it was, Harry did not notice the obvious shift in the air. He did not notice the way all the portraits of Malfoy ancestors were not in their frames, something which rarely happened, such as when Narcissa was screaming at wedding planners or when they had been waiting for Hermione to come.

He did not notice his magic.

Harry had made it all the way from the foyer to the hallway, was just about to place his hand on the doorknob to his bedroom when he suddenly realized what it was he was about to walk in on.

For one beautiful moment of make-believe, Harry thought he was imagining things. That this was surely just something his mind was inventing because he had been thinking about him; that he was sensing it because it actually happened like this at least once before, hadn't it? He must be projecting that aura on the other side of the door because he was tired and flustered.

This delusion did not last long.

Harry inhaled a sharp breath and took two hasty steps away from the door, moving until his back—which had his broom on it—collided with the wall. He still had his Invisibility Cloak on but he knew that would do him no good at all.

He had been out. At night, unsupervised. He had a new Firebolt on him and his clothes were covered in grass stains and little twigs. He absolutely *reeked* of the Forbidden Forest and bad behavior and in his pocket was a broken horcrux that also happened to be a hallow that also happened to summon Severus Snape.

And right now, after being absent for so long with no explanation as to where he had gone…

Of all the bloody nights for Lord Voldemort to return, waiting creepily

in his bedroom… did it have to be tonight?

Most alarming of all, perhaps, was that he *was* waiting. Harry did not know how long he had been there, but the fact that he had arrived unannounced in his room, only to discover that his human horcrux was not there, and had not raised all hell about it was… disconcerting, to say the least.

And his magic… Lord Voldemort's magic was a cold, stagnant sheet of black. No glittering specks of gold, no nothing. Just black.

Fuck, Harry thought.

He had a few options here. Harry considered them all carefully, as quickly as he could.

He could run. Bolt down the hall, find some other room and pretend like he had been sleeping there the whole time. He could say he was done with this one and its creepy mirrors and had decided that the time to find a new place to rest was in the middle of the night, without telling anyone.

He could run much further than that and leave the manor again. Perhaps the country, too, while he was at it.

Or… he could go in.

Swallowing hard, Harry knew this was his only real choice. The longer the Dark Lord sat there, unsure of where Harry was, the more likely it was that he *would* raise hell about it. Besides, seeing Voldemort again was what Harry had been wishing for… sure, it was unfortunate that he had to confront him like this, being caught red-handed for leaving the Manor, but… well, beggars couldn't be choosers, could they?

Lord Voldemort was in his room, alone… and this was an opportunity that Harry could not pass up.

He drew a deep breath. He already regretted tossing Snape aside as quickly as he had; Harry was sure he could have benefitted from some sage advice before this encounter. He tried to imagine what Snape would have told him to do.

He would say to clear your mind, you stupid, arrogant boy, Harry chided himself. *He would say to push all thoughts of rings and ghosts and forests as far as you can from your consciousness as possible and to go into this with a level head. He would say to be calm, prepared, and… respectful.*

Respectful.

Harry exhaled slowly and opened the door… where Lord Voldemort awaited him.

Maybe it was just the effect of having not seen him for what felt like an eternity, but Harry's breath instantly caught in his throat. Voldemort, who had been standing with his back to him, staring deeply into one of the crystal wall scones as though it mesmerized him, turned to face him. He did not look angry. He did not look worried or upset, even. His black magic hung around him like a cloak, and with the way the light hit him, Harry couldn't help but think it again: the same thought he'd had when he saw Voldemort as the Head of the Wizengamot, the judge of his trial.

Regal.

Voldemort's long, dark robes were smooth and flawless, hanging from his shoulders with an absurd elegance, despite his stillness. The crystal wall sconce shone directly behind him, almost giving him the appearance of having a halo. Voldemort looked like something out of a Renaissance painting.

When his dark eyes met Harry's, he smiled a small, slight smile.

Harry's gut twisted and fluttered. He felt light-headed again, but it was a very different sensation than the one he'd experienced in the forest.

"…Harry," Voldemort said quietly.

How, how did it always make his skin crawl when Voldemort said his name? It wasn't right. Harry swallowed hard and did his best to act like this was all completely normal.

"You're… you're back," he said. The greeting sounded even lamer when he said it out loud than it had in his head.

Voldemort nodded. "As are you," he said softly, his eyes darting from the unmade bed to the door Harry had just walked through, back to Harry. He took in Harry's disheveled clothing and the broom on his back.

Still, he didn't ask. He didn't say anything else at all.

Harry cleared his throat and shut the door. "Yep," he said simply. He

was pleased to note that he now sounded quite cavalier, even though his heart was absolutely pounding. “Just out for a morning ride, you know…”

Voldemort made a low, humming sound in his throat, but again said nothing. His magic, however, darkened a hair.

Harry swiftly shifted the focus from himself to Voldemort. It was astounding that he wasn’t furious. It made Harry incredibly anxious that he was not. “Where have you been?” he asked.

Voldemort did not answer, only stared at Harry’s face intensely. His magic curled, deep and black and twisted, almost like it was in pain. It was another miracle entirely that it wasn’t writhing with longing in Harry’s presence, but Harry was not about to question that. Not now.

Then Voldemort reached into his robe pocket. Harry expected him to retract the Elder Wand, and so he held his breath, preparing himself for whatever horror might unfold.

He gasped at what the Dark Lord revealed instead. Voldemort smiled at the utter shock that must have been on Harry’s face.

“What is that?” Harry asked, pointing at it incredulously.

“You know precisely what this is,” Voldemort answered. He lifted the object up, and as the light struck it, it glistened and glowed with a bright, blood-red hue. “I believe you once refused to give it to me yourself.”

“But it can’t be. That can’t be the… It isn’t the… ”

His voice failed him. Voldemort’s smile widened into something dangerous and dark.

“It is exactly what you think,” he said. His blackened magic twitched with triumph, and his eyes gleamed as they burned into Harry’s, lit up with fierce emotion.

“The Philosopher’s Stone,” he said with pride. “Mine at last.”

Chapter End Notes

fanart by Semina-Art

The Elixir of Life

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry stared at the ruby-red stone in absolute shock. Though he wanted to be full of disbelief, he knew that what Voldemort said was true. He recognized that stone far too well.

“But… how?” Harry finally said. “I thought it was destroyed, after what happened…”

“This is what Dumbledore told you, yes… It was also the story that was perpetuated to the public. But you will find, Harry, that men who go to great lengths to live eternally do not suddenly realize that they would prefer to be mortal again because someone has threatened their ever-lasting life.”

“Are you saying that Dumbledore… lied?”

Voldemort laughed. “Yes, Harry. I am once more informing you that Dumbledore was a liar. So was Nicolas Flamel, in this case.”

The vision, Harry realized. That was who he had seen; that was the old man Voldemort had tracked down.

“You killed him,” he said blankly. He did not need to ask.

Voldemort did not seem surprised that Harry guessed this. “Indeed." He held the stone up to the light again, admiring the way it glowed. “I alone knew that Flamel would not simply decide to die with his wife because I had nearly stolen his stone once… I was not the first to try, after all… Not that I blame him for feigning death. It was a valiant attempt to remain hidden. But I knew. Lord Voldemort always knows.”

“What about his wife?” Harry asked, a feeling of dread in his heart. He had not seen a woman in his vision…

Voldemort’s grip on the stone became tight and his magic whirled. “She managed to escape me,” he said scathingly. He then closed his eyes and inhaled a deep breath. His magic settled. “But it is no matter. Without this, she will not live long.”

The dread Harry felt continued to build as he watched the way Voldemort examined his prize. His red eyes, so similar to the color of the stone, were bright with greed.

“What are you going to do with it?” Harry asked slowly. “Are you going to use it on yourself…?”

“No,” Voldemort said. “It is for you.”

Even though he had sensed that this might be the answer, Harry still felt sick at his words. “Absolutely not,” he said at once.

“Yes,” Voldemort hissed. His smile vanished and his aura became dangerously cold. “You are far too fragile as you are now. You will drink the Elixir of Life every day. Someone capable will be constantly brewing it for you after the initial batch that I have made is gone; it has already been arranged.”

Harry blinked, both surprised and horrified. “Every day?”

“Yes.”

“But… what will that do to me?”

“The exact effects are somewhat unknown, as Flamel preferred to keep many of the details secret, naturally. I extracted what I could from his mind before ruining him, but I still think it imperative to have something of a… trial run.”

Voldemort’s eyes and magic were both full of something like glee when he said this. It unnerved Harry greatly. “What does that mean?” he asked.

“It means that I will be testing the limits of the Elixir on another person before giving it to you,” Voldemort answered. “Which is why I am here. I thought you might like to be a part of the decision making process of who this very unlucky individual will be.”

“The decision making process,” Harry repeated, dumbfounded. “What will you be doing to this person after they’ve drank the Elixir…?”

“Nothing nice.” Voldemort was smiling sardonically. He reminded Harry now more than ever of the Dark Lord he had grown to fear; the wizard who tortured people for fun and killed people emotionlessly.

That, combined with his much darker aura, filled Harry with horrible

anxiety.

“They might die,” Voldemort added lightly, as though it were an afterthought. “But probably not. For my purposes, I hope this will not be the case.”

“No,” Harry said. “I won’t let you torture and potentially kill someone just so you can feel better about my safety… and I’m not taking the Elixir, regardless.”

Harry knew that Snape would tell him to hold his tongue. That he would say to think about the potential consequences of his words, to treat Voldemort with more undeserved, ridiculous ‘respect’.

But Harry was never one to be cautious around those who deserved to hear the truth. “If you want your last horcrux to be safer, stop being the one to put me in danger. No one has driven me closer to death than you.”

Though his face remained blank, Voldemort's magic became an icy, heavy veil of black. Harry felt it, too—a storm of emotions in the Dark Lord’s heart. Anger, regret, denial…

A small but diminishing hint of remorse.

“You will take the Elixir every day,” he said, his voice low but firm. “And if you do not pick someone to test this on, make no mistake, I will… and you will not like who I choose.”

He fixed Harry with a truly evil grin. Harry knew at once who he would love to pick.

You have put a target on Ginevra Weasley’s back that will never come off…

“Fine,” Harry said angrily. “Fine. Just… can I have some time to think about this?”

“I will give you one minute.”

Harry scowled, but didn’t push his luck. He removed his broom from his back. He also took off his outer robe and hung it on the hook on the wall, taking his time to do so. With his back to Voldemort, Harry closed his eyes and thought.

Who could he possibly choose to undergo this? Torture from the Dark

Lord while under the influence of the Elixir of Life… A series of undoubtedly painful curses meant to kill, all with the hopeful premise that they would fail at their job…

Only a truly, truly vile person deserved that.

“All right,” Harry said as he turned around. “If I must choose someone…”

It was a surreal moment indeed as, around an hour later, Harry found himself in the Ministry of Magic. He was in a meeting room of some kind, the sort with a long, dark wooden table and many tall-backed chairs surrounding it. At one end was Lord Voldemort, who sat at the head of the table furthest from the door, facing it. Harry was seated at the chair to his right. At the other end of the table, resting before the other head chair, was a wooden goblet full to the brim of what Harry knew without asking was undoubtedly the Elixir of Life. It was a ruby red potion, much like the stone itself, which glowed with a dull, ominous light. Neither of them spoke as they waited.

Lord Voldemort did so with the stature of a man who was well-versed in waiting for things that he wanted, and which Harry had seen several times before: his hands were folded before him and his eyes were closed. Even his aura was patient. It was calm and steady, not agitated in the slightest.

He would have looked quite serene were it not for the fact that he held the Deathstick in those still hands. The piece of nearly black, dark wood stood out in great contrast to his long, pale fingers, where it was interwoven through them as though it were a part of him.

Harry’s demeanor was the exact opposite of the Dark Lord’s. It took a great deal of effort not to fidget, and his eyes continually darted back and forth between the door, the large, round clock on the wall, and the Dark Lord himself. Everything about the situation was nerve-wracking. Being so close to Lord Voldemort after his return; the silence that hung heavy in the room with the unnecessary need to command that it remain intact; Harry’s addled mind as he tried to recall everything he wanted to accomplish and how to best use these circumstances to his advantage.

At exactly seven o'clock, the door at the other end of the room opened.

Dolores Umbridge did not look happy.

Harry tried to imagine what this must have looked like from her point of view. To be woken up earlier than usual by a Howler from a Ministry official, informing her that she was to arrive at work at precisely seven today for a very important and urgent meeting… with the Dark Lord himself.

Harry wasn't sure that the Howler had mentioned him. Based on the way her wide, toad-like eyes swiveled to him in shock, he could guess not.

Harry smiled at her. "Morning," he said cheerfully.

She did not respond. Umbridge did not look happy at all to have been called to a meeting with Lord Voldemort and Harry Potter. She looked petrified. Her electric yellow, sharp magic revealed just how scared she was: it was zinging around her in terror, and it brightened further when she noticed the goblet full of an ominous-looking potion.

"You… you wanted to see me, m-my Lord?" she said quietly. Her eyes were now fixed not on Harry nor the goblet but on the Deathstick in Voldemort's hands. She still had one foot in the doorway, like she still had hope that he might send her away after all. Harry wondered if she was able to pick up on the additional warding spells that had been put in place—the ones that made it silent in this room, the ones that would make her unable to escape once she entered if she dared to try.

Voldemort lowered his hands and smiled pleasantly at her. "Dolores," he said kindly. "Please, sit."

He gestured towards the chair across from him, where the goblet rested, the inevitable intention of its presence clear. Umbridge swallowed so hard it was audible, then nodded and did as she was told. The door closed behind her and locked on its own with a loud *click*.

Perhaps it was wrong, Harry thought, to be enjoying this as much as he suddenly was… but he was. The grin on his face had begun to widen the moment she laid eyes on that potion, and Harry relished the way she looked so frightened and trapped.

"Drink," Voldemort commanded.

Harry watched in glee, feeling how torn and afraid her magic was. She clearly wanted to ask what it was and why she must drink it, but was nowhere near stupid enough to question the Dark Lord himself. Her face paled and Harry could see the sweat gathering on her brow. How

long would she dare to make the Dark Lord wait before obeying? Harry was curious to find out.

She wasn't given the chance to deliberate for long. "It will not harm you to do so," Voldemort said gently, as though reassuring a child that there were not, in fact, monsters hiding under the bed. "To not do so, however…"

Voldemort did not need to finish his thinly-veiled threat. Hands shaking violently, Umbridge reached for the goblet. Harry was amazed that she didn't spill any of the Elixir, her trembling was so bad. She held the cup to her lips and took a sip. She didn't drink much, and she set the cup down as quickly as she could afterwards.

There was a suspended moment where she sat perfectly still, surely awaiting whatever terrible effects were going to ravage her body. When nothing happened, she inhaled a deep breath. She blinked rapidly, and her magic twisted in an odd way. Surprised, probably, that she hadn't just died a horrible death. She looked across the table at Voldemort with a mixture of confusion and anticipation.

Voldemort explained nothing. Still smiling, he lifted his wand, twisted his wrist artfully, and quite casually said, "*Avada Kedavra*."

Umbridge did not have time to even scream as the killing curse collided with her chest.

Harry might have screamed himself if he had been able. The flash of green whooshing past seemed to suck the very air from his lungs as it went, and when Umbridge was struck, he could do nothing but stare with huge eyes, his jaw hanging open. The force of the curse sent Umbridge falling backwards, where her chair hit the ground with a sickening *crack*. There was a moment of stillness afterwards, much like the stillness of death.

Harry jumped up as soon as he was able. "Fuck," he swore, rushing over to her. Perhaps it was naive of him, but he hadn't expected the Dark Lord to immediately cast the killing curse. Her body was slack in the fallen chair, her wide eyes glassy and unseeing. Her magic was gone. "You… you've killed her."

"Have I," Voldemort murmured. He sounded bored, disappointed.

The Dark Lord slowly stood, making his way over to where Umbridge's body lay. He looked down on her with an analytical glint in his eyes. For a few seconds he simply stared, his magic quelling in

curiosity, but then he began to frown. His aura was darkening, soon to become what Harry knew would be insurmountable anger.

Umbridge gasped. Her magic sparked back to life, a plume of relentless, toxic yellow, and her body convulsed. She began hacking, coughing deeply as though she'd had the wind knocked out of her. Which she had, Harry supposed. In the most extreme sense.

Voldemort beamed as she came around, and his magic danced in triumph. "Good God," Harry said. "She lived… Umbridge survived the killing curse."

He looked at Voldemort, who seemed very pleased with himself. "I feel… exceptionally less special," Harry admitted.

Voldemort glared, but his magic did something that Harry rarely saw. It twitched the way his lips did when he was suppressing a smile. *He thinks I'm funny*, Harry thought with great amusement. *But doesn't want to show it.*

"It won't read as well in all the books about the Dark Arts that mention me," Harry went on, grinning cheekily. "Harry Potter, known as the Boy Who Lived, the only one to ever survive the killing curse cast by the Dark Lord… except for Dolores Umbridge seventeen years later, an absolute terror of a witch whom everyone detested and who honestly deserved it."

Voldemort failed to suppress his smile at that. Harry felt strangely proud of this. "Sixteen years," Voldemort corrected. "You were one."

"Details," Harry said dismissively. He looked down at Umbridge, whose coughing was lessening. "Are we done here, then? The Elixir is obviously quite protective… are you going to wipe her memory now?"

"Not yet," Voldemort said. He knelt down beside Umbridge and did something which shocked Harry so greatly he took several steps away in horrified retreat when he witnessed it: Voldemort quickly and unabashedly opened the front of her robes, revealing Umbridge's very pale chest and a bright pink, lacy bra. She was obviously still quite affected by the killing curse, despite its inability to actually kill her, as she put up no resistance at all. Umbridge didn't seem to be aware of her surroundings whatsoever.

"What are you…!?"

"No scar," Voldemort said, speaking softly. His magic was full of

curiosity as he examined where the spell had hit her. Indeed, there was no infamous lightning bolt scar burned into the skin of Dolores Umbridge.

Voldemort looked back over his shoulder at Harry. “I suppose you are still special.”

Harry glowered. “Of course she doesn’t have a scar,” he muttered. “You didn’t just deposit a fraction of your soul there, did you? I certainly hope not. I’ll feel *much* less special, then.”

Voldemort glared at him but did not deign Harry with a response. He stood, returning his focus to Umbridge’s face with interest.

“Are we done then?” Harry tried again. As amusing as it had been to watch Umbridge squirm, Harry did not enjoy watching her suffer as much as he thought he might.

In response, Voldemort took one step further away from his victim. She was still convulsing slightly on the floor, but it was quickly lessening, and Harry imagined that she would be truly conscious again soon.

Voldemort raised his wand. Harry thought he was going to modify her memories right then, but he was very, very wrong.

Without uttering a word, Voldemort slashed his wand down in a rapid, violent motion towards her. A brilliant red light flashed in the room, a familiar light, one that was so bright it was nearly blinding, and when Harry could see again, his heart was filled with horror.

“WHAT THE FUCK!?”

Umbridge’s head was cut clean from her body.

Harry watched in terror as blood pooled there, pouring from her open neck wounds. He backed away as far as he could, stopping only when his back hit the wall.

Voldemort, however, was undisturbed. He leaned over to get a better look at her face, his black magic shimmering in wonder as he observed her. After a few moments, he muttered, “Fascinating.”

“*What’s* fascinating!?” Harry shouted. “You cut her damn head off!”

“She’s still breathing,” he replied. “She is still drawing air through her

mouth despite being decapitated… and the blood has stopped flowing already…"

He stood tall, then turned to grin at Harry. His face and magic were nearly giddy. "She's still alive."

"Fucking fantastic," Harry snapped. His heart was hammering hard from shock. "Bloody hell… Is that enough now? Are you satisfied that this Elixir will do what you want?"

Voldemort didn't answer. He waved his wand lazily, and Umbridge's head quickly slid across the floor, aligning itself with her severed neck. Harry watched in morbid fascination as her skin and bones quickly began to meld back together.

"I do hope you're not planning on cutting my head off," Harry said.

"No, but someone else may one day attempt to try," Voldemort replied conversationally. "Someone very foolish and destined for a much more devastating death."

He began pacing around Umbridge's now intact body, vanishing the blood that had spilled with a flick of his wrist. "What other curses might I attempt to kill her with?" he asked.

It took Harry a moment to realize this was not a rhetorical question. "No more please," he said, shaking his head. "Haven't you learned what you want to know already?"

Voldemort's eyes gleamed dangerously. "Not nearly."

He snapped his fingers, and Umbridge went flying out of her chair, soaring across the room.

She collided with the wall harshly, with so much force that Harry was sure she must have broken something. Voldemort did not wait a moment before sending her soaring again, this time into a different wall. Then the ceiling, then the floor. And on and on and on.

"Stop!" Harry eventually cried. It had taken less than a minute for Umbridge to look like a battered rag doll, her limbs flopping about and twisted at odd angles. Bruises were forming rapidly all over her body. "Stop, just stop!"

To his surprise, Voldemort listened. Umbridge was suddenly suspended in midair, hanging stagnantly above the table. It reminded

Harry at once of a dream he'd had, when the Muggle Studies instructor had met her end.

Voldemort looked at Harry with one brow raised. "I was under the impression that you despised her."

Harry was breathing hard, he realized, and he felt sick to his stomach. "That's more than enough," he said. "Stop."

Voldemort gave a slight shrug. "As you wish." He lowered his arm and Umbridge came crashing down, landing hard on the wooden table. The goblet with the Elixir of Life almost toppled over, but Voldemort stopped it before it could, easily hovering it back to its place. Not a drop spilled.

Umbridge's breathing was much more ragged than Harry's. Her bruises were getting visibly worse by the second, and it was clear that every one of her limbs was broken. Probably most of her ribs too, Harry reckoned. Maybe even her neck and spine. Her magic had dwindled significantly, now little more than a halo of pale yellow about her. Her eyes, at least, were closed. Harry was grateful for it; he could not bear to look into them again.

Guilt flooded his heart. He would have never thought it possible to feel such pity for Dolores Umbridge, but looking at her like this, battered and broken, he could not help it.

At least she won't remember any of it, he thought glumly. It did little to make him feel better.

Voldemort watched her, taking in Umbride's shattered bones and bruises as though they were a moderately interesting work of art. He seemed content to simply stare at her now that Harry had commanded he stop, doing nothing to further harm her nor help her.

"What are you waiting for?" Harry asked, unable to stand it. He hated seeing her like this.

"Quiet," Voldemort said.

Reluctantly, Harry waited with him, saying nothing else. Only the sound of Umbridge's troubled breathing filled the room. She was not dead, but Harry imagined she wished she was.

After several agonizingly long minutes, her magic started to change, to strengthen slightly. It was growing brighter.

Moments after this, her body followed suit. Slowly, her bruises began to fade. Her breathing became less strained. Voldemort's aura was swelling in delight as they watched her recover, and Harry jumped when her leg, which had been at a horrid, unnatural angle a moment before, suddenly snapped back into place.

"Absolutely incredible," Voldemort murmured. He looked happier than Harry had ever seen him. "Truly remarkable. I vastly underestimated Flamel and his ability to downplay the magnificence of his creation."

Harry's queasiness continued to grow. "Can you end this now?" he asked. "Torture may come easily to you, but it's not something I particularly enjoy… no matter who it is."

Voldemort's gleeful expression faded when he looked back at Harry. It softened into something blank, unreadable, but his magic said something else. It was that almost-fondness again, alongside some dark, somber emotions. Sadness and longing all wrapped up together.

There was almost a glimmer of light there. Almost.

Voldemort turned and pointed his wand at Umbridge's temple. He did not say anything, but there was a pale light that emanated from its tip, glowing against her skin. Her eyes fluttered open and she stared at the Dark Lord, looking at him with a slack jaw. Her pupils were very wide.

"This meeting was to congratulate you on work well done," he told her. "You have gained favor with your Lord. Continue to be an asset to the Ministry of Magic, and you shall continue to rise."

She blinked at him owlishly. "Yes, my Lord," she said, her voice dull. "Thank you, my Lord."

Voldemort flicked his wand towards the door, and the lock unclicked. "Now go."

Umbridge sat up and climbed off the table. Looking starry-eyed, she buttoned up her blouse and fixed her robes, seemingly without wondering why they were askew at all. She then bowed robotically and left the room without another word.

As much as Harry didn't enjoy the fact that she would start her day thinking she was doing a great job and was in favor with the Dark Lord, Harry was glad to see her go.

After she left, Voldemort pocketed his wand and walked towards the end of the table where the goblet was. Harry's heart felt as heavy as a boulder when he picked it up. He wanted to back away, to flee, truly, as Voldemort advanced on him, but he knew it was no use. Harry stayed rooted where he was as the Dark Lord approached him with the Elixir of Life.

He paused before him, offering the goblet. "Drink," he commanded.

Harry stared down at the ruby liquid. He did not want to drink it, but he knew Voldemort would not let him leave the room until he did.

It's temporary, he told himself. *Whatever it does to me, it isn't forever… And I need his favor now.*

Harry took a deep breath. "You want me to drink this so that you'll know I am not so… fragile," he said. "Well, I want some things, too."

Voldemort's magic instantly blackened. It was so dark and cold; when and why had it gotten to be like this again? It made Harry's skin crawl. "Drink," he repeated, "and perhaps I shall listen."

Harry bit his lip, refraining from saying something stupid. Voldemort watched the action and his eyes, those red eyes, gleamed. His magic twisted in a wave of want.

It was a short burst of lust. Instantly, fear and loathing took over his magic instead, and Voldemort looked like he might be sick himself. "Drink it now," he seethed.

Harry did not hesitate again. He took the goblet and drank deeply.

The Elixir tasted metallic, and though it was warm in color and glowed, it was very cold. It felt like ice water as it trickled down his throat.

He didn't expect to feel anything afterwards. Harry thought it might be like drinking Veritaserum, something mild and undetectable.

He was wrong.

The moment he swallowed it down, Harry felt a rush of something… strong. Powerful. The same kind of rush he got when he captured the snitch after a long, difficult game of Quidditch. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to bask in the sensation.

“How do you feel?” Voldemort asked.

“Infinite.”

The answer left Harry’s lips before he knew what he was saying. He felt his face warm at what he thought was an extremely stupid response. When he opened his eyes, however, it was not to see the Dark Lord staring at him in amusement. He was looking at Harry with an odd look, one full of relief and nearly joy.

He stared for a long time, looking like he wanted to say something, do something. But then he took the goblet from Harry’s hands and stepped away.

“Good,” he said. He waved his wand over the goblet and the contents disappeared; not vanished, Harry could only presume, but moved elsewhere. He set the empty cup on the table. “Every morning, a cup shall be brought to you. Every morning, you shall drink it all. No exceptions. I shall know if you do not.”

He turned towards the door, walking steadily towards it. “I shall send someone to escort you back to Malfoy Manor,” he said, but the way he said it had far too much weight to it. Like it was a goodbye; like he was saying something final and tragic. His black magic was full of pain, but it was also resigned.

Then he was leaving.

Harry watched him walk away as though in slow motion, because as he did, it all clicked. He understood, suddenly, what was happening.

Voldemort *was* leaving him.

He had damaged Harry nearly to the point of death, and it had changed everything. He must have decided then that he would do whatever he needed to do to secure Harry’s safety, then leave him for good, safe in the Malfoy’s care.

Except, he wasn’t leaving to protect him from himself, Harry now knew, because the Elixir would see to that. No, he was leaving because he knew that Harry was changing him.

He knew it and Harry knew it, too. Harry had watched how, over time, Voldemort’s magic had changed, how *he* had changed. How he was becoming more and more… human.

And addicted, Harry thought. Voldemort may have been content to deny that for a time, but he must have realized how truly addicted he was when he was away from Harry. He must have discovered just how much he was drawn to Harry's pure soul and hated himself for it. He would see that as a weakness, Harry knew, and would prefer to be as he was before: cold, detached, cruel… powerful.

Broken.

Harry's mind raced as he tried to come up with what to do, what to say. What advice would Snape give? Harry wasn't sure; all he knew was that he had only seconds before Voldemort walked through that door, and it would be difficult if not impossible to get him alone again after this moment. And he couldn't, *wouldn't* let Voldemort walk away like this. Harry had power to influence him when he craved his soul, as perilous of a dynamic as it was. And it could, potentially, maybe, be the way to heal him. The only way.

Besides… Voldemort as he was before, sadistic and unfeeling, was a far more dangerous ruler for the wizarding world than one who knew what wholeness felt like… the one without Harry Potter's presence to sway him.

"Wait," Harry called out.

Voldemort paused. He didn't turn to look at him. "Whatever your requests are, I will consider them. Later. Write them out and send them with Miss Granger to give to me when she returns."

He kept walking. His hand was on the doorknob.

"Wait!"

Harry had no idea what he was about to do as he rushed forward, stopping only when Voldemort whipped around, alarmed at Harry's sudden proximity. "What?" he said. His magic trembled, like he was both repulsed and tempted by how close Harry was.

"You don't… you don't have to do this," Harry told him, throwing all caution to the wind and speaking boldly. "I know what you're thinking. That this… thing that's between us, that it's horrible. But it's not. And… and you're not the only one that craves it."

It was somewhat of a lie; while he couldn't deny that it was a pleasant sensation, Harry knew he was not nearly as affected by it as Voldemort. He was not the one with a broken soul.

Voldemort was staring at him with veiled eyes. Harry wet his lips, feeling more reckless than ever. Perhaps it was a side effect of the Elixir, but he felt invincible. Fearless. “You’ve won,” he said, his voice low. “The war, the Ministry… me. You’ve won it all, and now I’m unbreakable. You can’t hurt me like you did before, not when I’ve drunk the Elixir. You’ve just proved that. Why deny yourself? You’re Lord Voldemort. You’re the most powerful sorcerer of all time… you should deny yourself nothing.”

His pulse racing, Harry took another step forward, closing the gap between them. Voldemort’s aura was swelling, full of feelings he was trying and failing to contain. His longing was paramount; Harry knew he would break if he pressed him.

“…and I don’t want you to,” Harry said, his eyes flickering to Voldemort’s lips.

Harry could tell that Voldemort knew he was being manipulated. He could tell that he knew that Harry knew he had some sort of hold over him with his addictive soul, with his pureness and wholeness, as his human horcrux. Harry could tell that he knew he was dragging him back in, back into his magnetic light, and that, really, was the beauty of it.

Voldemort knew it… but Harry knew he would not be able to help himself.

“Do not,” Voldemort said, but for as many times as he’d spoken those words, never once had they sounded weak. It was a magnificent thing, Harry thought, hearing the Dark Lord sound weak. He wanted to hear it more often.

Harry leaned closer.

“*Please.*”

With that one word, Lord Voldemort’s resolve shattered.

Chapter End Notes

fanart by lovinlamb

Closer

Light, warm and buoyant and utterly intoxicating, flooded them.

Harry's breath hitched, that familiar breathlessness, as Voldemort grabbed him around the back of his neck and pulled him forward. Their chests collided and he pressed his forehead down against Harry's, their faces so close that Harry was certain their lips would crash together, the beginnings of a downward spiral.

They didn't.

Voldemort held him close, his fist curled around Harry's neck and gripping him painfully tight. His breathing was harsh, but he had otherwise frozen. The feeling of their souls connecting was thrumming between them, strong but not as overwhelming as Harry might have thought. It was certainly not the worst he had experienced. Still, Harry could feel Voldemort's insatiable desire for *more.*

Harry did nothing. Voldemort's whole body was rigid and his eyes were closed. His breath was hot and heavy; Harry could feel it on his face. He recalled how once it had smelled strongly of blood and ice.

Harry waited to see what he would do. Voldemort's magic was hard to decipher when they were like this; it was hard to focus on much of anything aside from that blissful feeling. All about him was a cloud of black and, the more he tried to sense it, glints of gold.

Yes, Harry thought, feeling triumphant. Those glints had been almost entirely absent before. Feeling them again, the proof of light in Voldemort's otherwise black aura, was a relief.

And maybe Voldemort sensed that relieved feeling that wasn't his, because his grip loosened. He shifted away from Harry, lifting his forehead from his. The bond between them dissipated. Based on how his magic swarmed afterwards, erratic and pulsing, Harry could tell that this had taken a great deal of control on the Dark Lord's part.

But Harry would not have needed to be able to sense his magic so acutely to know this. Voldemort's face and demeanor said it all, for once. His expression was both livid and desperate, and his body trembled. His pupils were blown wide as he stared, the thin rim of his irises a smoldering red, at Harry's face. In every sense, he looked like an addict who was thinking one thing: *not enough.*

“You,” Voldemort said, but he could hardly say even that word without needing to pause. He inhaled a labored breath and, glaring, tried again. “You…are…”

Again, his words failed him. Harry had never seen the Dark Lord like this. He was unable to stop the smile that formed on his lips as he watched Voldemort tremble, looking so much, he was sure, how he, Harry, had many times.

“I am what you made me,” Harry said levelly. As he said it, he realized just how true it was. Painfully, tragically true. “I’m the half-blood orphan who grew up with unloving muggles who never understood me, never understanding what I was myself. I’ve been called the Boy Who Lived, Slytherin’s Heir, a fucking psychopath, and the Chosen One, year after year. I feel you when you’re near, when you’re angry, when you’re excited. I’m the object of your murderous obsession… I’m everything you made me.”

Harry laughed. He didn’t sound like himself. “I’m your horcrux,” he finished. “And now, thanks to you—again—I’m immortal.”

“Not the object of my murderous obsession,” Voldemort said through tightly clenched teeth.

Harry barely stopped himself from scoffing. Was that really his takeaway from all that? “Oh, okay,” he drawled. “My *sincerest* apologies. What I should have said was, ‘the object of your murderous obsession until very recently, when that all became a bit of a gray area, considering all that you’ve said versus all that you’ve done.”

Voldemort’s aura reacted strongly to that, becoming heavier and dark. Guilty feeling, if not full-blown remorse. “Actions speak far louder than words,” Harry added spitefully.

He had no pity for Voldemort in this state, nor was he afraid of him. That might have been because of the Elixir, but Harry didn’t think so. He had the upper hand regardless, maybe for the first time since the war had ended. And it was glorious.

“…Then why prevent me from leaving you in peace?” Voldemort asked quietly.

Respect, a dark voice in the back of his mind warned, one that sounded very similar to that of Severus Snape’s.

Harry ignored it. He smiled again, feeling gleeful. Hearing the Dark

Lord ask him that was probably the closest he would ever get to hearing him admit, out loud, that Harry had some power over him. And it was very lucky, he thought, that this conversation was happening in the Ministry of Magic. It seemed that not even the Dark Lord could disapparate in such an old and powerful building, one where the wards for preventing such actions were so powerful. Otherwise, Harry was sure he would have left too quickly for this miracle to happen.

“A wise man once said,” Harry murmured as he moved closer, relishing every tiny shift in Voldemort’s magic, in his every twisting feature, “keep your friends close…”

Even though he knew what surely must be coming, Voldemort did not move. He watched Harry advance like someone hopelessly entranced, his eyes stuck on Harry’s lips.

Harry stopped when he was close enough to whisper and know that he would be heard.

“…but your enemies closer.”

Harry tapped into the light this time… and he did not do so lightly.

Voldemort either could not resist it or chose not to. The second time it ignited between them, stronger than before, he had no restraint. Voldemort grabbed Harry with both hands and pulled his face towards his, claiming his lips at once in a desperate, deep kiss. His tongue slid effortlessly and ruthlessly against Harry’s, and he moaned into his mouth, a deep and throaty sound that Harry could feel all the way down to his core as though it were emanating from his own chest. Voldemort’s hands left his face to claw at his shirt, tearing it open with no regard whatsoever.

This time, Voldemort’s actions did not bother Harry at all. Was it because he had started it, expected it, and was therefore prepared for it? Was it because Voldemort’s lustful emotions were permeating his own again? Was it because the Elixir of Life made him feel as invincible as he was, and therefore fearless? Or was it because he was genuinely turned on himself, despite everything?

There was clearly something very wrong with him, something that might take years of therapy to begin to understand, but Harry hardly cared at the moment. Regardless of the reason, Harry only knew that, against all logic, he was enjoying everything about what was happening. Voldemort was kissing him like a man starving for it, and

rather than alarm him, all Harry could think was *good.*

Feeling bolder than he ever had in his life, Harry decided not to wait for things to unfold the way he knew they would if he did not act. He pushed with all his strength against Voldemort's chest, and felt a thrill of something unnamable rush through him when he succeeded in being the one to shove the Dark Lord against a wall. Surprisingly enough, or perhaps not so surprisingly at all, Voldemort didn't seem to mind. He only pulled Harry closer, somehow managing to take hold of him by the hair and shift to kiss his neck at the same time, as well as continue to rip his shirt off. Harry could feel his hardness against his thigh when their bodies collided. He felt like his skin was on fire.

The Dark Lord and I are about to fuck in the Ministry of Magic, Harry thought, oddly matter-of-fact about the whole ordeal. *At seven in the morning, no less. Awfully early on a week day to be fucking Lord Voldemort.*

Harry grinned, a little delirious as he made yet another bold move. He grabbed Voldemort by the chin and kissed his mouth again, hard. He couldn't tell if the moan that followed was his own or not. He didn't care either way. Harry wanted him closer, closer.

He felt in control. He felt powerful.

Everything stopped.

There must have been much to yet learn about the connection between their souls, because even though Harry had initiated it, it was clearly Voldemort who chose to end it. There was a heartbeat of stillness in which that light vanished, the same moment in which Voldemort severed their kiss. His grasp on Harry's hair moved to his neck, and it became painfully tight.

No.

Voldemort did not say the word, but Harry could hear it resonate clearly in his mind. One word, and then Voldemort hurled Harry away from him, throwing him by the neck with such force that Harry flew back, slamming against the table. He then fell forward, landing hard on his knees. He coughed when he did; Voldemort's grasp on his throat when he threw him was short, but violent.

"You think you are in control of this, of *me*," Voldemort hissed. "You have no idea what you are doing… of what you even *want* to be doing."

Though his magic was a wall of angry black, there were now unmissable flecks of gold. Harry, still on his knees, smirked. “I think I do,” he said hoarsely.

“You do not.” Voldemort’s aura was a combination of rage and something very close to panic, possibly even fear. His face became stonelike, but Harry could sense the misery in him. He inclined his head at him slightly. “This ends now. Goodbye, Harry.”

Voldemort turned to leave again. Some instinct, some gut reaction coming from he didn’t even know where, kicked in. Furious and refusing to let this be it, Harry did something unthinkable.

He reached for his wand.

He pulled it out, quick with his hands as he’d always been, great Seeker that he was, and threw a wordless hex at Voldemort’s backside. He didn’t even know what he was trying to cast; a plume of magic simply erupted from the yew tip, fierce and bright and vibrantly yellow-orange, like a shooting star.

His aim was true.

Harry watched, wide-eyed, as his unknown spell went hurtling towards Voldemort. The Dark Lord turned in shock to see the hex, his own eyes going wide, his thoughts clear by both his magic and his face: Had Harry Potter truly just thrown a curse at Lord Voldemort when his back was turned?

Voldemort didn’t waste time trying to draw the Deathstick to block it. Instead, he raised his arm, and a wandless plume of magic formed there—Harry could see the shimmer of it in the air like a shield. His hex collided with it, then ricocheted away even faster than when he had cast it himself.

Back towards him.

Harry didn’t have time to appreciate the horror in Voldemort’s eyes before the enigmatic spell of his own making was bright in his face, his vision full of yellow and orange, making it look like his whole world had gone up in flames. When it did hit him, it was the oddest sensation. It felt at first like his bones had been lit on fire, the hot-wire feeling zinging around inside his body as though lighting up every single nerve as it quickly and methodically scoured his skeleton.

Then, just suddenly as that sensation had overwhelmed him, Harry

felt nothing.

Nothing at all.

The room fell sideways, then blurred, then went black.

Time skipped. One moment, Harry was in the Ministry of Magic, falling to the ground before blacking out—at least, he presumed. The next he was laying fully on his side, opening his eyes to somewhere dark, cold, and immediately ominous.

The first thing he noticed was Voldemort's all too familiar magic behind him. It was scarier even then the dark world around them, which was, admittedly, quite frightening.

The second thing he noticed was that he could not feel his body whatsoever… and, far worse than that, he could not move. He could open his eyes, he could breathe, he could swallow, he could feel his beating heart… but other than that, he was completely paralyzed. Like a body-binding curse, except he wasn't in a plank-like position, and he was unable to feel anything. Which was exceptionally odd, as he was certain the ground he was on must have been uncomfortable. It was rocky and sinister, and Harry got the sense that it was cold in here, though he could not even feel the chill in the air. He thought he heard a drip echoing in the distance, some kind of water. It was almost like they were in a cave of some sort…

Clarity ripped through Harry's heart. He could not lift his head to see anything beyond the ground in front of him, but he was certain that if he could, he would learn a few things. That they were indeed in a cave, one that happened to have an island in the center; one that might still have an enchanted boat and an army of the undead hidden in its depths and one that had, on the island's center, a basin, though it would now be empty.

"Awake?"

Harry tried to move, but was unable to. Voldemort took his sweet time as he walked around him, stopping when he was finally in Harry's line of vision. Harry had to strain his eyes to look at his face rather than stare at his boots, trapped in the position his body was in —sprawled on his side, like he'd just been carelessly tossed there. Probably had been, too. Was it his own curse that had done this to him, or something the Dark Lord had done? He wasn't sure.

Voldemort smiled, a very dark grin that Harry knew all too well by now. His aura glistened. *At least it's not solely black again*, Harry thought morosely. *It could be worse.*

Could it?

Voldemort laughed when Harry could do nothing but glare at him.

"I think we need to have a serious discussion, Harry," he said. He spoke as though this was a casual situation; Harry was beginning to feel nauseous.

Voldemort knelt down, carding his fingers through Harry's mess of hair. Harry swallowed hard, unable to do anything more.

"I think we need… some ground rules."

Ground Rules

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Voldemort was, in Harry's opinion, taking too long to appreciate the predicament Harry was in. His smile was—there was no other word for it—*evil*, and his aura, glittery though it was, moved in a way that told Harry he was enjoying this all too much.

Bastard, Harry thought. He wished he could wince as Voldemort continued to stroke his hair like he was his pet.

"You're probably wondering exactly what kind of spell you managed to strike yourself with," he said. "It was a curse, in fact. One known as the Impediendum Curse; simply put, it paralyzes the victim almost entirely. It is a rather *dark* spell, too."

His eyes flashed when he said the word dark. Voldemort stood and began pacing around Harry, leaving him with nothing to look at but the stones in front of him.

"The Impediendum Curse differs from what you know as a full body-bind curse," he went on, as though Harry had just inquired politely about the difference. "The latter is purely physical, a curse which causes the muscles to all become rigid, hence the plank-like state victims are forced into. The former, however—the Impediendum Curse—is completely mental. Do you know what that means, Harry?"

Harry, naturally, could not respond. Internally he glowered, as Voldemort prowled somewhere behind him. His magic was horrible to perceive; it was glistening and swelling with pure, vindictive joy.

"It means that your inability to move at the moment is because your mental state has been compromised. The Impediendum Curse has convinced your mind that it no longer has control over your body. Which is the only reason it has continued to affect you this long. The Elixir of Life would have repaired you by now had it been a corporally-based curse. Isn't that fun?"

He laughed. Harry had never heard a less pleasant sound.

"It has also convinced you that your nerves are no longer functioning. Which is why you cannot feel it when I do *this*."

Harry must have been kicked pretty hard, because he went sprawling onto his back quickly. Voldemort was right, though; he didn't feel it at all.

From this new unfortunate point of view, Harry could see much more. The cavernous ceiling of the hell he was now in. The tall, stone basin to his right, the one that once held the locket. The ring of floating, soft flames surrounding them on the small island.

The Dark Lord, towering over him and looking gleefully twisted.

"An interesting curse indeed for you to fire at me, your *lord* and *master*," Voldemort went on. His magic shone brighter at his own, self-prescribed titles as though to emphasize just how much he meant them. "I must say, I'm rather impressed that you were able to cast it at all, considering you surely never learned it. It is a difficult curse to master in the first place, let alone to cast wordlessly. But that is the nature of unintentional, emotional magic… you thought, 'stay' so ferociously that this is what your magic, subconsciously, did."

Voldemort leaned down, still leering, his magic still glittering dangerously. His dark hair fell forward too, framing his pale face and shrouding his features in shadows.

Those eyes, though. They looked brighter and bloodier than ever.

"One might call that desperate, Harry."

Harry could do nothing in response.

Voldemort stood erect again, then continued his maddeningly slow pace circling Harry's body. "I do know the counter-curse," he said, "but I must warn you, it is not pleasant. In fact, one could say it is downright painful. Your nervenedings all sparking back to life at the same time. Or the sensation that they are, of course. Should I cast it now? Or should I leave you here, paralyzed, to think about what you've done?"

Release me now, Harry thought as fiercely as he could. *Release me, I can't stand this!*

Voldemort's magic and expression both told Harry that he could definitely understand him, but Voldemort, being Voldemort, ignored Harry's demand and continued his dreadfully long monologue. "I must confess, I thought we had been making such progress," he sighed. "After you so unwisely summoned your now dead house-elf, I thought

you had learned that your actions have consequences. Clearly, you have learned nothing."

Harry's heart was beginning to pound so badly it was hard to focus on what Voldemort was saying. The sensation of not being able to move while adrenaline flooded him was making him feel bizarrely claustrophobic, and the dark, cavernous setting was not helping matters.

"I do hope you appreciate the setting I've chosen for this conversation," Voldemort went on, surely knowing what Harry was thinking. "I thought it might reinforce the lesson to speak in a place where you made one of your most grievous mistakes of all. You remember, don't you? The time in your life when you were determined to *murder my soul?*"

The flames surrounding them all brightened sharply. Harry's breath stilled; his hammering heart paused. Voldemort was too far away from him to see, but his magic said enough. It blackened horrifically and coiled tightly, like the fist of some dark and vengeful god preparing to strike.

A moment later, and the spell of darkness passed. Voldemort continued walking again, speaking so casually it was beyond unsettling. "So very different from your current intentions… Yes, Harry, I am all too aware of your little altruistic plan… if you can even call it that," he said condescendingly. "You think that you can heal my broken soul through remorse, even if that is *so* unlikely for someone as merciless as me. But you still hope. Because that's what you do, isn't it, Harry? You save people, even when it seems an impossible task. Even people you don't know. Even people you don't like." He scoffed, like there was nothing stupider to him in the whole world, being altruistic. "Even people you once tried quite valiantly to kill."

Voldemort paused. Harry did his best to focus on his breath, to stop from spiraling into a panic attack.

He couldn't move. He couldn't feel. *He couldn't move.*

Voldemort swooped in, suddenly so close that Harry surely would have jumped, if he could have.

"Allow me to erase any notion that you can save me once and for all, Harry," he said. "You didn't just eliminate ties to my immortality when you destroyed my horcruxes… you murdered fragments of my

soul. Forever. Those pieces are never coming back, never could, not even if I was willing to try, not even if I felt all of the remorse in the *fucking* world. So do us both a favor and get that ridiculous plan out of your head. I am sick of feeling it. I am sick of sensing how sad and cold and broken you think I am, all the time, and how you think you can fix it. Fix *me.* I am not a shattered mirror; I am not a simple puzzle that you can put back together. *You* destroyed those pieces. *You* murdered any chance at this redemption for me that you now fantasize about. It is done. Do you understand me?"

He grabbed Harry by the jaw, jerking his face so that he was staring directly into his crimson eyes. Harry couldn't feel his hand on his chin. This terrified him more than the Dark Lord's glare, than the dark cave they were in, than anything in the world.

He couldn't feel. *He couldn't move.*

Yes, Harry thought, his breath hitching. Voldemort's magic was a cloud of darkness around him, choking him as though it were poisonous. It was so hard to breathe. *Yes, I understand.*

"Good," Voldemort said. He released Harry's jaw, making his head roll pitifully to the side where he was once more forced to face the rocky ground. "But that is not why we are here now, is it, Harry…"

He began to stroke his hair again. "No, we are here because you dared to strike me. Excuse me, *attempted* to strike me. When my back was turned, with my own wand, no less… how very *Slytherin* of you."

He laughed. It was a loud, deep laugh, and it echoed off the cave walls in a sickening way.

"All because you wanted me to *stay* so badly," he went on. "All because you wanted *me* so badly…"

He laughed again, this time in a soft, breathy way. It made the hairs on Harry's body stand on end. He leaned in.

"I promise you, Harry," he whispered throatily. His lips brushed against Harry's ear.

"You *shall* have me."

He raised his wand. The Deathstick shone in the light of the floating flames, looking for a moment more like a sword than a long piece of elder wood. He pointed it at Harry's chest, directly over his heart.

"*Renatus animus*," he said.

There was a flash of orange light, and Harry's body jolted back to life.

Voldemort had been putting it lightly, Harry swiftly learned. It was not uncomfortable nor simply painful, it was downright horrendous. It was like his every nerve caught on fire, while at the same time coldness assaulted his skin, his throat, his lungs. Harry inhaled deeply and coughed afterwards, rolling onto his other side and coughing even more. His body ached; his side stung from where Voldenmort had kicked him. Everything hurt.

Everything.

Harry's physical sensation returned, and with it, so much more. His mind fully caught up with what Voldemort had told him, and it was like his heart burst into pieces.

Horrid, furious rage.

It was an anger like he had never known; losing Sirius had not come close to this searing feeling that erupted within him. He pushed himself up onto his hands and knees and his body convulsed. A horrible sound ripped its way out of his throat, something awful, something more than a scream or any cry he had ever made. He slammed his fists into the rocky ground, hard, over and over. His skin cracked and bled.

He couldn't stop it. He could move again, but he couldn't control himself at all. He screamed and roared and bellowed, that horrible, uncontainable rage tearing itself out of his heart. The sounds echoed all around him. Harry thought he might drown in them.

Voldemort's magic was stirring, doing something. But he did not interrupt.

He waited.

Harry's wordless, terrible screams eventually dulled and softened. He collapsed in on himself and cried.

Harry had never angrily cried before; he wouldn't have thought such a thing was possible. His tears were hot. He forced himself up onto his knees so he could swipe them away, even more angered that they were there at all, and stared at his hands afterwards. The bloody cuts and wounds he had given himself by punching the ground were

already beginning to stitch themselves up, thanks to the Elixir of Life he had ingested. Watching the intricate, strange movements of his skin healing so quickly did, for a moment, distract him from his sudden, blind rage.

It was… magical.

Harry blinked and shook his head. He ran his hands over his face again, smearing what he hoped were the last of his unwanted tears away with them. His scar was tingling like crazy. He dragged his fingers down his chest and realized his shirt was torn open in the front.

Right. Voldemort had done that.

"…Why?"

Harry, still on his knees, looked at Voldemort. The Dark Lord was standing at the very edge of the island, as close to the ring of flames as he could be. When had he gotten there? Had Harry pushed him when the counter-curse had taken effect, or did he back away on his own when Harry lost it? He wasn't sure.

Voldemort's aura was cold and unmoving. His face looked… mildly shocked, Harry supposed. It was so odd, too, because although he had been filled to the brim with emotion a moment before, Harry suddenly felt numb. Like the part of his brain that processed feelings had short-circuited after all that and said, 'Nope, that's enough for one day, can't handle any more of that.'

Harry turned his attention away from Voldemort, choosing instead to focus on the water that surrounded them, outside the circle of flames. He was filled with the urge to jump into it headfirst.

Voldemort quickly made his way over to him. He knelt directly in front of Harry, then cupped his face with both hands. He did so gently, like he was not the same villain who had just kicked him and gripped his throat so tightly just minutes ago. Harry's scar burned.

Voldemort was staring at him, Harry knew, but Harry's gaze was still on the water. "I do not understand what that was," he said. "I need you to explain it to me."

"Explain what?" Harry murmured. The water. Would the dead still erupt from it if he jumped in? He wondered.

“They would if you dared to touch it, so do not. And I am speaking of your feelings.” Voldemort’s voice sounded strained, like he was talking with his teeth clenched. Like it pained him to speak at all. “I do not understand why your response to what I said was… whatever that was. I do not even know what to call it. It was so… painful.”

“Get out of my head,” Harry said dully.

Voldemort’s magic churned, deeply uncomfortable. Also irritated. “You have no idea how much energy I spend doing my very best to not be in your head,” he responded. Harry believed him; he looked quite unhappy about it all.

“You’re not trying that hard right now,” Harry pointed out. “I can feel it.”

“No.” Voldemort’s hands still hadn’t left Harry’s face. “Because I am trying to understand you. Every time I think I do, you prove me wrong. I thought I knew exactly how you would react when I cast that counter-curse, but that… surprised me. That terrible feeling. That rage. That tragedy that flooded your heart. I could hardly keep it from swallowing me. Why did that happen to you? Tell me.”

He rubbed his thumb softly against Harry’s cheek. It was the affectionate gesture that a mother would make to her upset child, not that of a monster to his prisoner.

He was serious, though. He really could not grasp why Harry was sad and angry, but he wanted to know. And that was something, wasn’t it? Lord Voldemort wanted to know why someone was hurting. It was only because it related so directly to him, of course, but it was still a small miracle.

“Get out of my head first,” Harry repeated. “Or do your best, at least.”

Voldemort’s eyes narrowed but he nodded. The burning, prickling sensation in his scar faded.

Satisfied, Harry spoke. “You talk about emotions like they are attacks that happen *to* people. That’s not how it is. They happen within us… not to us. But that doesn’t matter right now.”

He lifted his eyes to meet Voldemort’s. “I felt rage because I’m angry. Because after everything, after all this time I’ve spent denying it, you’re right. I was lied to. Dumbledore lied to me. Again.”

Voldemort's magic twisted in shock. It made a strange smile tug at Harry's lips. "Not about all of the things you said at my alleged *trial*, your *honor*… and I'm not talking about Flamel, either. I mean about you. He suspected what the diary was but didn't tell me, not for a long time. When he did confirm that they were horcruxes, he didn't speak about them like they were… part of a person. Like they could be saved. Like you could be saved. He convinced me you were unsalvageable, and I believed him, without question. Because you were right about one thing—I knew him exactly as you said I did when I was a child. I thought Dumbledore knew everything. I believed in him more than I ever believed in anyone in my entire life."

Voldemort's hands fell from Harry's face. Harry's eyes drifted back to the water. "He saved my life when he brought me here, you know," he said. Harry remembered it all too vividly. "Dumbledore drank every drop of the potion you put in that basin, and I helped him do it. I gave him water afterwards, and your Inferi attacked us. But even after he had just re-lived his most horrible memories, he was able to cast a spell of fire and save us. Something so simple, and I had been too panicked, too stupid to think to do it myself. I couldn't save us then, but Dumbledore did."

Harry looked at Voldemort. The Dark Lord looked surprisingly calm, considering Harry was nostalgically reflecting on the man he hated most. "You can say what you will of Dumbledore, but he was an incredible wizard."

"I never denied that," Voldemort said quietly.

Harry smiled. Voldemort did not.

"Incredible but biased," Harry said. "He never believed you could be saved. He never even suggested to me that such a thing would be possible. He could have. He had to have at least had an idea of what I was in my first year after everything that happened. The fact that I could feel you when you were near; that I sometimes felt you. But he said nothing about it, and when I was twelve I killed a part of you without even knowing what it was. I thought the diary was just a book of memories. I didn't know it was a part of your soul. I didn't know."

Voldemort's aura shimmered slightly. It was almost cautious. He hesitated, but then said, "I was told that my diary was… draining Ginevra Weasley."

He let the words hang in the cold, stagnant air. When Harry didn't

respond, Voldemort's magic and expression darkened. "You would have killed it even if you had known," he finished bitterly.

"I DON'T KNOW!"

The anger ignited again so quickly Harry himself was caught by surprise. The flames in front of him flickered slightly, though he hadn't meant to do it. "I don't know what I would have done, because I was never given a choice! I was never given all the information to make a real decision! So I don't know what I would have done, not really. But… but I like to think that if I had known everything, if I had known you had broken your own soul but that you could potentially undo that… I don't think I would have done it. I think I would have found another way."

Harry bit his lower lip, staring at the rocky ground like he might find the answers in the stones and rubble. But when he really thought about it, he found he already knew. "I would never have killed you," he said firmly. "I wouldn't have let you… I wouldn't have let you kill… her, but I wouldn't have let you die either. Not at my hand."

Harry almost laughed at himself. "But I guess that doesn't matter now, does it? Because you're right again. I already killed most of you. Or was a vital part of those deaths, at least. And now it's too late. I can't help you. I can't save you. I can't save anyone."

Harry felt those hot, horrible tears welling at the corners of his eyes again. "I'm sorry," he said, hating how much it hurt to say it. How much he meant it. "I'm sorry I can't—"

He stopped speaking when Voldemort once more grabbed his face. "No," he said, cutting him off. "Do not apologize for being unable to accomplish what would have proven to be an impossible task. I would never have been willing to try and undo what I did to my soul."

"You don't know that," Harry said.

To his surprise, Voldemort smiled genuinely. "You are extraordinarily stubborn," he said. His magic did that strange twisting thing again where it glistened with fondness. "There is no point dwelling on what could have been. Repairing *my* soul is not an option… but I have you."

Harry blinked at him, confused not by what he was saying so much as how he was acting. Voldemort stood. "I have been going about this all wrong, I'm afraid I must admit," he said. "I should clarify. I have been

dealing with you incorrectly, Harry. You."

He started pacing again. Harry braced himself for a lengthy explanation. He also stood; kneeling on the cursed island was hardly comfortable.

"At first, I was certain that this…connection was a curse," Voldemort began. "But recently, my perspective has shifted. Years of being so broken and without a body have affected me in ways that I had been content to deny. I suspect I would have gone on forever being that way, unaware of just how horrid my reality had become. But then I learned exactly what you were… and I attempted to connect with you in the same way I had with Nagini."

His magic shifted darkly when he said the name of his deceased pet. It was clear that Voldemort truly grieved her loss.

For a moment, Harry felt guilty… but then he remembered what the repercussions had been, how Neville had been thrown into his cell and then Bellatrix had circled him, cursing him with her words and her magic and Neville had said he forgave him but Harry couldn't, he couldn't—

The warmth flooded him so suddenly Harry almost fell. Would have, had Voldemort not been at his side in a moment, catching him and holding him close to his chest.

Harry sighed and laughed at the same time, another thing he wouldn't have thought was possible. He felt both deliriously high and annoyed, his mounting anxiety gone in an instant. The Dark Lord certainly had a way of making the impossible happen, didn't he? Harry laughed again, louder.

"*Why* are you laughing?"

Harry pushed him away, standing on his own again. The intensity of the light between them diminished to something more bearable. "Because our relationship is the most fucked up thing in the entire world," he said.

Voldemort didn't disagree.

"I'm sorry," Harry said. He was still buzzing pleasantly from their bond, and he was fine with letting it go on. It was better than having another panic attack, he supposed, even though he knew it was a horribly unhealthy way to deal with his feelings. "I interrupted your

speech. You were just about to talk for a long period of time, explaining your latest epiphany about us."

Voldemort glared, but it seemed it was not possible for his magic to darken hatefully when he was attuned with Harry. It glistened instead, more gold than usual. "I need to know that you will be calm and not panic," he said.

"Er… what?"

"I need to end this," Voldemort said. His eyes were focused more on Harry's lips than his eyes.

"End… what?"

"*This*," Voldemort said, growing irritated. To clarify, the light between them intensified. Harry felt the undeniable urge to move forward, to go to the Dark Lord, to feel his skin and to sink into that heat—

Voldemort took a step back, and the light vanished entirely. Harry blinked, coming back to himself. "I cannot speak with you when… that is happening."

It was almost funny, watching how uncomfortable this made him. It would have been, at least, if it didn't make Harry equally uncomfortable.

"Right," Harry said. He felt breathless himself. It *was* impossible to think clearly when that was happening, let alone have a serious conversation.

"Are you… okay?"

It was such a simple question, yet it was easily one of the more shocking things Voldemort had ever said. Harry wondered if he had ever asked anyone if they were simply 'okay' before.

"Er, yeah," Harry said awkwardly. "I'm fine."

"You are lying."

"Obviously. I'm a fucking mess."

Harry could tell that Voldemort was about to get angry again, so he kept going. "I'm good enough. I'm not going to freak out again."

He didn't look entirely appeased, but the Dark Lord nodded shortly.

“That first time I… connected with you,” he said, quickly regaining his stride, “I had no idea what to make of it. I had never experienced anything like it.”

“Me either,” Harry mumbled.

“It frightened me,” Voldemort confessed, surprisingly. “I tried to forget it happened. I could not. That was the first time in so many years that I had not felt… broken. Cold… dead inside.”

Harry was taken aback at his choice of words, but he couldn’t say they were wrong. Harry had felt exactly how cold Voldemort’s fractured soul was. It was indeed like someone who was dead inside.

“I thought I could control it, my insatiable desire to feel that again. That I could control both it and you. I failed to do so. I quickly became far too addicted to the feeling. Thoughts of it consumed me when I was without it. Without you.”

His eyes darkened, flickering to Harry’s mouth again. “I am still unsure which I long for more.”

Harry’s face grew hot in an instant.

“Since my… complete lack of control manifested itself at the wedding,” Voldemort continued, which Harry thought was an awfully nice way to describe hunting him down with snakes and then forcing himself on him, “I thought it would be best to break that addiction. I took my hunting of Nicholas Flamel as the opportunity to do so. It was… difficult.”

His magic twisted and his eyes once more went to Harry’s lips. Harry swallowed uncomfortably. He was sure it *had* been difficult for the Dark Lord to go through withdrawal like that. He looked like he was having a hard time right now.

“Clearly, this attempt failed. Not because I was incapable of breaking from it… but because of *you.*”

Harry couldn’t tell if he was venomous or excited; his magic seemed to indicate both.

“*You* won’t let this die because you think you can use it against me,” Voldemort said quietly. He was advancing again, slowly walking towards where Harry stood in the middle of the island. “You think you can hold power over *me*, manipulate *me*, control *me*.”

He now seemed entirely venomous, Harry thought. Voldemort's magic was building into an ominous black sheet, dark and full of rage.

"No," Harry denied, "I would never think that I could control you—"

Voldemort was directly in front of him in a flash. "*Lies*," he hissed. He smiled with his teeth barred, a monstrous grin. "You do believe you hold power over me… and you do."

Harry was beyond shocked at that confession. "I… I do?"

"Stop. Your attempt at acting unaware is pathetic. We clearly hold power over each other. That much is painfully obvious… much to my great displeasure. Being pitted against one another has only brought turmoil and pain to both of us. I am no longer in the position where I could easily imprison you and do what I want with you, tempting as that picture may be, and you have clearly lost the war in which you so valiantly fought on Dumbledore's orders… We are now at an impasse. Which brings us back to ground rules."

He backed off, giving Harry more space before saying, "We must learn how to coexist in a way which benefits us both."

Harry almost scoffed. "Not sure how I will be benefiting," he said.

"No? You don't think you and everyone you care about will benefit from your willing presence in my life? Surely you and your soul make me a *better man*."

His words were dripping with sarcasm. Harry glared, because yes, he did believe that. He did think—no, he *knew*—that the Dark Lord was much less… evil with Harry's influence. Sometimes he was even downright vulnerable.

He was… human.

It was obvious that Voldemort believed no such thing was true. He was grinning maliciously, like he was daring Harry to say just how true he thought it was. Which was difficult, because he, Harry, was right, and Voldemort was wrong. The Dark Lord didn't know how well Harry was able to sense what he was really feeling; how he could perceive his magic in the most intimate of ways.

Harry shook his head, directing his thoughts elsewhere. Even though Voldemort was not actively trying to infiltrate his mind, the last thing he needed was for Voldemort to discover that. Surely it was better to

let him think that Harry was unsure if he was a master manipulator and liar instead. If he was aware of how deeply Harry understood his influence and power over him, his fragile pride would probably shatter, exploding into more terrible wrath that would hurt everyone in its path.

Voldemort was shattered enough.

When Harry said nothing, Voldemort continued. “All that aside, you benefit in other ways. You like it, too.”

Voldemort’s grin broadened when Harry’s face went warm again. “Not as much as you do,” Harry said defensively.

“That was never the argument. Of course I glean far more pleasure from our connection. I am the one with the broken soul. You, however, enjoy it as well. I feel how much you do. I’ve heard you moan with pleasure under its influence, gravitating towards me like a moth to a violent, blood-thirsty flame.”

Harry’s whole body felt hot, now. He wasn’t wrong.

“I’m—that isn’t—I’m not the one who loses control,” Harry said, forcing the words out. It was difficult to talk about this so openly, but it was an uncomfortable conversation that was long overdue.

“True,” Voldemort replied. “Which is why neither of us should abuse this connection. Whenever one of us does, both of us lose.”

Harry thought about that. It was true, he realized. Whenever Voldemort had tried to control or manipulate Harry with it, it usually ended badly for both of them. And when Harry had so recently tried to use it to overpower Voldemort, well…

“So… you’re proposing a truce?”

“I’m proposing that neither of us, from this moment on, ignites this absurdly debilitating connection without first earning the consent of the other.”

Harry’s eyes went wide. This sounded an awful lot like equality. And Voldemort had never once sought out consent from Harry when it came to their connection. In fact, he had been downright violent when Harry denied him.

“Why would you do that?” Harry asked. “What if I just say no all the

time?"

Voldemort looked wildly unconcerned. "Then it would not happen," he said. "And I would go on my way."

Then Harry understood. He would be on his way all right, being in a horrible mood, far more likely to wreak havoc on those who would be unfortunate enough to be in his path. Which Harry would never allow, of course, considering that Hermione was his personal assistant and likely to be on the receiving end of that undeserved anger.

"Fine," Harry said. At least he would no longer be caught unprepared for that warmth himself, he thought, and he would have the *option* of saying no.

"In return, you will never initiate that bond without first asking me and earning *my* consent," Voldemort said. His expression grew far more serious, for this was obviously the most important part of the agreement for him. Now that he knew just how royally Harry could, to put it simply, fuck him up, he was determined to make sure it would not happen again.

"Fine," Harry repeated.

"Good," Voldemort said, smiling pleasantly. "Then we are in agreement."

He lifted his arm, offering Harry his hand, but Harry was not yet prepared to take it. "And what if one of us breaks this agreement?" he asked. "I take it we're not about to make an Unbreakable Vow here. If we're just trusting each other and taking each other at our word… what are the repercussions if one of us messes up?"

Harry was the one grinning now. He had full confidence that if one of them ruined this, it would be Voldemort, not him.

Voldemort tilted his head curiously. "What would you like my consequence to be, Harry?"

Harry frowned. He thought furiously, choosing to turn away and focus on the water again while he considered this. When Voldemort inevitably broke his word, what would he want the result to be? Something that would give him an edge, something that he would agree to now…

What would Snape tell him to demand?

Suddenly, Harry recalled with a cold dread those who were in Azkaban. McGonnagall was still there, and who knew how she was fairing?

Harry mentally kicked himself, realizing he should have demanded that she be set free *before* he agreed to Voldmeort's proposition. Harry thought to use this as a repercussion, but dismissed it. He did not want to wait until Voldemort messed up, for he did not know how long that would take. He would wait until tomorrow, he decided, and bring it up separately. If this went well, perhaps he would be agreeable to Harry simply asking for a favor.

Voldemort did reward desirable behavior, after all.

Harry's mind raced faster than ever. What should he ask for?

What would Snape say?

"If you break this agreement," Harry said slowly, still looking away, "you'll give me my eyes back."

Voldemort's magic stirred; that request surprised him. His expression, however, remained neutral. "Fine," he agreed—a bit bitterly, Harry thought. "And if *you* should break this agreement, Harry… You will take the Mark."

Harry instantly laughed. Then, when it was clear that was not a joke, he glowered. "You're serious?" he balked. "I would never do that willingly. Never."

"Then you best not break your word," Voldemort said coolly. "Do we have an understanding?"

Furious, Harry nodded. "Fine," he snapped. He raised his hand. "You have my word if I have yours."

Voldemort took his hand and grasped it firmly. "You do," he said.

It was an inane action, all things considered, but shaking Voldemort's hand felt incredibly concrete. Like he had just signed a magically binding contract, though neither of them had done any such thing.

It was just one man's word to another.

Voldemort's magic glittered in triumph, and Harry felt as though he'd made a terrible mistake. He released Voldemort's hand. "Is that… is

that something you want?" he asked.

"For you to take the Mark?" Voldemort asked. He grinned. "No. I have never wanted that… I have marked you enough, I think."

"Then why make that your consequence for me!?"

"Because I know it is something that you do *not* want," Voldemort said slyly. "And for as little as I care whether or not you take the Dark Mark like one of my many soldiers, I would greatly enjoy the very *public* ceremony we would hold."

"That will *never* happen."

"Good. I hope it doesn't."

He smiled widely. Harry hated him.

"Now what?" Harry said. "Are we done here?"

"Not at all."

The ring of fire dimmed, creating a much more sinister atmosphere in the cave. It instantly felt cooler, too. Goosebumps erupted all over Harry's body.

"You started something earlier," Voldemort murmured. His magic glittered and glowed, and the emotion there was all too obvious to Harry. "And I am not one to leave things unfinished… are you?"

Harry's pulse sped. He took a step back, knowing exactly what Voldmeort was suggesting and yet unsure of what was about to happen.

"I have seen your heart, Harry…" he murmured, his voice getting deeper, "I know exactly what you want, what you desire… you are flooded with so many emotions one could drown in them. And I know them all. I have tasted every one."

Clinging to whatever false sense of control he thought he had left, Harry said, "What do you *think* you mean right now?"

"I know that you feel irrationally guilty almost all of the time," Voldemort answered, to Harry's surprise. "I know that you are submerged in sorrow and pain so deeply it fills your soul. I know that secretly, deep down… you crave punishment."

He was much closer now. Harry was unable to move. It was like Voldemort's accusation had struck him in a wound he was unaware he'd had; it froze him as suddenly as his unintentional curse had earlier.

"I know you crave more than that," Voldemort continued. "You crave me, too, and you hate yourself for it. But you cannot help it. It isn't your fault. It's all been done by my design and you know it. It infuriates you but it's unstoppable. You fantasize about me… and the shame you feel makes it both better and worse. It is wrong. *I* am wrong. I am the villain and you are the hero. Attempting to seduce me for the greater good was justifiable in your mind, but this is not. This is just… wrong."

He was much too close now. His aura was so bright and beautiful, and though the promise of that connection loomed in the air, Voldemort did not bring it to life.

"I can give you everything you desire and more, Harry," he said, speaking so quietly it was nearly a whisper. He lifted one hand, tenderly brushing Harry's messy bangs aside with his fingers. "The punishment you undeservedly seek, the pleasure, the pain… the bliss."

At some point while he was speaking, Harry's eyes had gone to Voldemort's lips and were unable to leave them.

"All you need to do," he said, "is let me."

Harry was still frozen, but his body was reacting in horrible ways. His blood was pumping and heat was pooling low in his gut.

"Say yes, Harry," Voldemort purred. He let his hand fall to Harry's chin, barely touching it as he spoke. He was looking at Harry's eyes, Harry was sure, but he couldn't tear his attention away from his lips.

"Look at me."

Harry was instantly reminded of their altercation against the vanity; it did little to help matters. Against his better judgment, Harry met his blood-red eyes.

"Do I have your consent?" he asked softly. Then, after a beat of silence, he said, "You can tell me to stop at any moment… I am yours to command."

Harry might have laughed at his words, words that he too had spoken

out of desperation, saying anything to get what he wanted at the time. There was simply no way it could be true. Voldemort's lack of self-control when it came to Harry was practically legendary by now; how in the world could he truly promise such a thing?

Still, he was asking. Voldemort’s eyes were blazing with desire and his magic was heavy with lust, but he waited.

“Mine to command,” Harry echoed quietly, feeling a bit stupefied as he did.

Voldemort nodded, then leaned in to speak in his ear. “Yours,” he answered liltingly. “Is that what you want? Tell me, Harry.”

It was. It was terrible and so fucking wrong but it was everything, everything he wanted.

Harry swallowed hard. “Yes,” he whispered.

There was another spark of dark triumph in Voldemort’s magic, and then that eviscerating light bloomed between them.

Chapter End Notes

fanart by Grimbramwell

Undone

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Voldemort grabbed Harry roughly by the hair and turned him, shoving him forward, bending him over the basin. Harry's face loomed over the now empty vessel. Not even the seductive light flowing through him could stop the bolt of terror that shot up his crooked spine.

“Your heart is right, Harry,” Voldemort said. “You *want* to be punished because you *deserve* to be punished.”

Harry hissed in pain when Voldemort tightened his grip on his hair, pushing his upper thighs harder against the curved rim of the stone. There was a dull flash of magic, and a sudden chill against his skin told Harry that all his clothes had just been vanished.

“You are guilty of a litany of sins against me, and you want to atone for all of them… for damning a soul that can never again be whole…”

Yes.

Harry had never realized that was something he could want, would want. *Did* want. But as he stood there, his scalp stinging from Voldemort’s grip and his legs aching and that warmth pulsing through him, he knew without a shadow of a doubt that there was nothing he craved more. It was supremely masochistic and utterly fucked up, but it was true. Maybe it was the root of why he hadn’t been as traumatized as he probably should have been after the wedding reception.

Harry *wanted* to be hurt.

The Dark Lord let out a soft, low laugh. He leaned in so that his hips pushed into Harry's backside and his chest grazed his back. It became evident then that he hadn’t vanished just Harry’s clothes in that moment—Harry felt the warmth of his skin against his, bare and exposed and bursting with that buoyant light. He felt Voldemort’s already hardening length pressed against him.

Voldemort’s magic was a lustrous haze of lust and want, washing over Harry in a familiar way. When he spoke, his voice was a sickly sweet

purr.

“Lord Voldemort will provide.”

One of Voldemort’s hands grazed Harry's upper thigh. Another sudden rush of magic spilled over him, something wet and warm and somehow both pleasant and uncomfortable at the same time. He was being… lubricated, Harry realized in an oddly dull way. He supposed he should have been grateful for that. Instead he felt a thrill of alarm, for it made very clear what was going to happen.

He supposed it shouldn’t have frightened him—Harry knew exactly what he’d been asking for when he’d tried to seduce Voldemort back at the Ministry. Yet now that it was here, and even though he had consented to it, that panic emerged, fluttering in his heart despite the brilliant warmth and the want that was swelling in him that he could not blame on being solely Lord Voldemort’s.

The Dark Lord paused; the light permeating between them lessened. Harry knew that he must have felt that fear, too.

“I will stop,” Voldemort said, though his ragged voice and curling magic made it clear that he did *not* want to.

Harry took in a deep breath, forced to confront the situation now that his mind was clearer. He was afraid. There was no denying that. How could he not be? This was Lord Voldemort looming over him: a nightmare made flesh, the true villain of his story.

But Voldemort had been right in that, too… somehow, knowing this, made it that much more thrilling.

Harry was terrified and panicked and he *wanted* it.

“No,” Harry said. He gripped the edge of the basin hard, and turned to look up at the Dark Lord over his shoulder. “*Please*,” he breathed.

Voldemort did not need to hear anything else. With one hand in Harry’s hair and the other pressed against his lower back, his magic once more a suffocating cloud of desire, he plunged into him, forceful and merciless.

The warmth that burst between them was nearly mind-shattering.

Much like in the forest, Harry felt no pain where he was certain there should have been plenty. He felt only a bombardment of blissful,

numbing pleasure, the kind that made him moan in a throaty way. It might have been mortifying if Voldemort hadn't made a similar noise. Harry felt his pleasure as intimately as he felt his own. His magic was building uncontrollably, the connection between them once more becoming too much to bear. Harry feared he might faint at the intensity of it.

Just as that thought crossed his mind, everything lessened again, diminishing to the point where Harry could focus somewhat. He could feel just how impaled he was, could register the bite of the basin against his legs and the cold, hard ground beneath his feet.

The Dark Lord stilled inside of him. While he kept one hand rigidly in his hair, his other moved gently against his backside, his fingers trailing against Harry's skin. He was allowing him time to adjust, Harry realized. To fully appreciate exactly where he was.

Voldemort was not interested in taking Harry in an uncontrolled, chaotic manner like he had last time.

This… this was very different.

"I remember every time you have wronged me," Voldemort said, and although Harry could tell it was a monumental challenge for him to speak levelly now, to not simply fuck him violently until he came undone—his dark and quivering magic told Harry that much. No, he was clearly determined to speak.

"You shall repay me for every, single sin… for keeping the stone from me as an impetulant, foolish child."

He pulled out and slammed into Harry again, hard. Harry let out a sound that was something between a gasp and a groan as the basin bit even deeper into his legs, as he was filled so abruptly in a way that was both shockingly agonizing and pleasurable. Voldemort was not influencing him enough that he was numb to the pain, only enough that the bliss accompanied the action, too. Some of which was Voldemort's bliss, certainly, but… not all of it.

A swell of triumph bloomed in Voldemort's aura, swathing them both. "For *murdering* my diary," he said, and though Harry should have been prepared for it, he was not—Voldemort slammed into him again, even harsher than before. Harry's eyes watered at the mixture of searing pain and pleasure.

Yes, he thought, ignoring the ocean of shame that threatened to

swallow him whole. *Yes, please, more…*

“For bringing me a spare when I was destined to rise again when I only wanted *you;* for escaping my grasp yet again…”

Harry’s breath was stolen from him with the next intrusion; he couldn't even make a sound. His knuckles were white against the basin. He hated just how much he enjoyed this, hated that this was what he had become, hated that this, surely, was the epitome of Voldemort’s greatest fantasy, and here he was, begging him for it with his traitorous thoughts.

Yes, he desperately pleaded. He deserved this. He deserved so much more.

“For destroying my prophecy and ruining my carefully laid plans yet again; for bringing others to die for you; for casting me out of your fragile body when you belong to *me*… ”

Harry wasn’t sure if the tears were from the physical pain or not, any longer. God, he had always brought others to die for him, even if he hadn’t wanted to, even if he hadn’t meant to. It was always his own stupidity and recklessness that had killed those he loved, wasn’t it?

Harder, Harry demanded, closing his eyes against the tears and emotion. *More.*

“For running and hiding when your world fell apart, when others needed you most… for staying away from me as long as you did, resurfacing only when war called you out… for *always escaping me!* ”

A horrid, bitter wave of rage washed over him, and Harry saw a flash of a memory he was not expecting—a vision from Voldemort’s point of view as he and Hermione fell from a window, disguised as muggles, barely escaping Voldemort’s grasp as they tumbled towards the snowy ground before disappearing with a sharp *crack*…

Harry’s head was still spinning when Voldemort spoke again. “For murdering my locket,” he hissed, and he crashed into him again. Harry whimpered and moaned. He blinked his eyes open to stare into the empty basin where the locket had once rested, both the true one and a fake.

“For my goblet,” Voldemort spat, once more burning into him, another unforgiving thrust. “For my diadem,” he snarled, another painful yet blissful violation. Harry’s vision blurred.

Voldemort paused, this time pulling out almost entirely. He leaned down over Harry's back, his chest against him, putting his lips to Harry's ear. His voice was very soft when he spoke next, but every word was laced with cold, furious venom.

"For telling Neville Longbottom to murder Nagini, and causing the tragic demise of them both."

It was the hardest and most painful intrusion yet. Harry swore the basin shifted at the force with which Voldemort impaled him; his body burned in pain and yet a sickening pleasure was there, too, Voldemort's and not. A cracking sob escaped his throat. Voldemort stilled inside him, his fingers wrapped tightly in his hair. He stayed that way, breathing harshly, his own painful emotions darkening the air.

Harry became almost manic with a need he barely understood. Voldemort's sudden refusal to move caused him more anxiety than when he'd been afraid to be fucked by him in the first place. "I need more," he managed to beg, voice breaking and pitiful. "More, please, I need it, I can't—"

Either Voldemort had decided he had said all he'd needed to say, or he finally lost the self-control he'd maintained. His magic that he'd been restraining came unleashed, along with the hold on the connection between them. The light burst forth as though a dam had broken, and so too had all of Voldemort's dark, toxic want.

But Harry didn't feel like it was too much, this time. It barely felt like enough.

Yes, he thought, or maybe Voldemort was thinking that—it was impossible to tell. All Harry knew was that the Dark Lord was moving fast now, entirely uncontrolled as he slammed into him over and over, pushing him into the basin so forcefully that Harry was certain he would bruise if not bleed.

He didn't care. It wasn't enough.

Harder, he thought viciously, though he was unable to do anything other than whimper and groan out loud anymore. *Fuck me harder, more—*

Voldemort abruptly stopped. He hissed like he was in pain when he did, and Harry was dazed for a moment, confused. It took him a moment to realize why he'd frozen so suddenly. Harry recognized the

way that Voldemort's magic had coiled and brightened.

Harry considered acknowledging it for a moment, but realized at once this would be a mistake. He could only hope that Voldemort was too wrapped up in his own mounting pleasure and turmoil to care what Harry was aware of.

“Why?” Harry asked, certain that the rest of his unasked question was obvious. *Why did you stop?*

Voldemort’s breathing was fast. Harry was curious to know what his face looked like right now, but was too nervous by far to turn and look. His magic told him enough, anyway—Voldemort’s aura was a tightly wound, trembling knot. The golden glints were quivering.

He released Harry’s hair. The light between them was pulsing, strong and bright.

He seemed unable—or unwilling—to answer. “Why?” Harry asked again sharply. Until that moment, he hadn’t even noticed how hard his own cock was, painfully erect over the basin. Harry squirmed back against him, pressing himself against his hips.

Voldemort gripped Harry’s waist, stopping him. His magic coiled even more, dark with an obvious desperation to keep going.

“Do not,” Voldemort grit out, once more using all of his willpower to speak.

Harry ignored him, pushing back against him. Voldemort’s resolve and grip weakened, allowing himself to be surrounded, moaning as Harry moved. He regained his grasp when he was fully inside, but his magic was quivering twice as hard now, so painfully, powerfully lustful that Harry felt the longing as though it was his own.

His desperation to be hurt was nothing compared to Voldemort’s desire to have him.

“Pl—”

The plea was cut short when Voldemort reached around, grabbing hold of Harry’s length and causing him to gasp instead. The warmth emanating from his fingers was enough to make him see stars; he hadn’t realized how badly he had needed to be touched there until it was happening.

“Fuck,” Harry swore, instantly rocking his hips forward, into his hand, blinded to everything else except the need to be stroked, hard, fast, now. “Ahhh…”

“Is this what you want, Harry?” Voldemort purred, his aura infinitely more smug and comfortable now that he was back in control. The tightly wound coil loosened. He trailed his fingers up and down Harry’s cock, torturously slow and far too gently.

Harry sucked in a sharp breath when his thumb flicked across the tip. He was leaking, but could hardly be bothered to care. *Yes*, he thought, angry to be asked something so obvious just because it made Voldemort feel powerful. *Yes, please—*

“Say it,” Voldemort demanded, predictably. “Tell me what you want, and I will obey…”

Harry would have screamed in frustration, as Voldemort was continuing to barely drag his fingertips along his twitching cock. Instead, he grit his teeth and said, “I-I want you to—ah—please, just touch me—ah—”

It was far from eloquent, but it was enough for Voldemort. He fully grasped him and at the same time slammed into him again, and the pain and pleasure of it was so much that Harry’s vision failed him. He saw nothing but flashes of white, could hear nothing but his own loud, keening moan.

Voldemort thrust into him again, and again, as hard and as fast as before, this time stroking his cock at the same time.

There was no help for it—the pleasure was far too overwhelming. Harry grabbed the rim of the basin so tight his knuckles were surely cracked and bleeding. He tried to hold out, but it was hopeless.

I’m going to—I can’t, I…

Voldemort was surely aware of Harry’s thoughts, and only fucked him harder because of them.

Yes, Harry… Come undone for your master…

In one particularly long stroke along his cock, Harry’s hips jutted forward, and he fell apart.

There were no words to describe the feeling of such an orgasm. It was

easily the most powerful, mind-blowing sensation Harry had ever experienced. The light between them felt blindingly bright; the warmth that flooded between their souls so strong that Harry felt they truly had become one entity. He might have shouted or moaned, if he could have, but after one initial gasp of pure shock Harry's voice abandoned him, leaving his mouth open in a silent, torturous scream. He came harder than he would have thought physically possible; every single muscle in his body went hard as it felt like his very life was pumped out of him, forced out into the empty basin like some sick, twisted attempt to refill what had been lost.

Just as he was certain he could never feel something so pleasurable again in his life, before he had even come close to coming down for that impossible high, Voldemort's magic tightened around him again, covetous and possessive.

Yes, was the Dark Lord's singular thought, and with another thrust, he too came apart.

Harry felt it like it was his own body, and maybe it was. For a moment, he saw the world from Voldemort's eyes; saw his own backside that he hadn't even realized had been clawed so deeply. He saw his own body tremble and felt it, too intimately, when Voldemort buried himself inside him and came, deep and hard.

It was even more blissful, to be surrounded by such tightness, such warmth…

Harry fell back into his own mind, feeling in a very different way the Dark Lord's undoing. Voldemort's moan was low and guttural. Harry felt it in his bones, felt it in his own aching throat. His orgasm seemed to last forever; Voldemort poured himself into him, throbbing and groaning, pushing himself in deeper and deeper like it was just not enough, never enough. His magic wrapped and coiled and pulsed, a glimmering spectacle of blackness and gold.

Harry hated how it made him feel whole rather than disgusted or used. He hated that he didn't hate it, not at all.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the blissful connection between them waned significantly. Voldemort's magic calmed into something beautiful and deeply satisfied. The gold was beautifully bold. Harry's lips twitched into a smile.

In a sudden movement, Voldemort pulled out of him. Harry gasped and might have fallen, were he not already draped so fully over the

basin. He tried not to look into it again.

Harry thought to move, but found that this was no easy task. His muscles were all locked in place, it seemed; perhaps he had been in the same position for too long. He decided to wait until the Elixir kicked in; surely it would heal his strained and aching body soon.

Harry could feel Voldemort's… seed, he supposed with mild disdain, dripping out of him, down his thigh. He shuddered at the feeling, but was unable to do anything about it yet. Then, to his great surprise, Voldemort's magic shimmered, stirring again. Harry's head snapped in his direction.

The Dark Lord had never looked so pleased in his life.

His eyes were deep and scarlet as they roved over him. Harry was, for a moment, distracted—he had never seen the Dark Lord naked before, and was shocked at his physique—but he was unable to stare so for long. Voldemort was ogling him, Harry, bent over and fully exposed, his own spend leaking out of him, and…

And somehow, he was getting turned on again.

Harry finally pushed himself up, and though his knuckles had begun to heal, his body still ached. He ignored it. "Wait," he said, turning himself around—for he did not like the way Voldemort's magic was churning and his eyes were glinting at all. "You can't—you aren't really—"

But he was really. Somehow, insanely, Voldemort's cock—which by all rights should have been entirely spent, and which was also, Harry could now see for the first time, unfairly large—was stiffening again, beginning to harden as though he had not just fucked Harry into oblivion.

"I have seen many, many beautiful things," he said, his eyes finally finding Harry's face. He took a step closer to him, and another. "I've seen magic in its purest, rawest form… I've seen my most dangerous enemies tremble and cower before me… but that…"

He came close enough to touch him, nearly close enough that his cock was against his thigh. "Seeing you, Harry Potter, bent and broken and full of me… was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen."

He lifted his hand, grazing the back of his fingers against Harry's cheek. Harry felt his whole body burn, horrifically hot. Voldemort

shifted so that his cock did press against him then, and Harry did not need to be able to perceive magic to know exactly what he planned to do. It was clear in his sadistic, evil grin; it was clear in every single aspect of his body as he towered over him, tall and imposing.

"No," Harry choked out. Voldemort grabbed him by the chin, looming over his furiously blushing face. "You can't possibly be serious right now. How can you even—I can't, I…"

His words were cut short when Voldemort closed the space between them, pressing his lips to Harry's in that gentle, almost sweet way he sometimes did. Harry hated when he kissed him like that, because it was infinitely more effective than when he was rough and passionate. His lips were sinfully soft, and when they were against Harry's, he felt powerless to resist them.

Voldemort's tongue lapped at Harry's lower lip, and Harry caved—he let him in, sliding his tongue against his and then, without intending to, found that his arms had floated upwards until they were around Voldemort's neck, pulling closer.

Voldemort's magic had never been more beautiful than in that moment. The gold sparkled and glowed, making it easy, for a moment, to forget how much darkness there was that was still a part of him.

The sweetness was temporary. Soon that familiar lust began to build again, bringing with it that toxic blackness, that *want*.

Harry broke their kiss, in shock that it could even be possible. How could he want to fuck again that quickly? How was he even *able?*

And how was it that he could influence him again so strongly and so quickly?

"Harry…" Voldemort murmured, pressing himself against him so their most intimate parts were touching, making Harry's feel as though his skin had been lit on fire. "What have you done to me…?"

Well, at least he wasn't the only one who was wondering that. "I… I…"

Naturally, Harry had no answer. The connection between them was growing stronger again, and Harry could feel the sway of Voldemort's emotions pulling on him, too, dragging him into his sea of want.

"You took your punishment so well… *Very* well… Your master is most

impressed…"

Harry was unsure what he should be feeling at those words. He mostly felt shame, he supposed, and guilt—and even more shame and more guilt, because despite how terrible it all was… he still wouldn't say no.

What had Voldemort done to *him*?

"And you know that Lord Voldemort rewards good behavior…"

He smiled wickedly, then pulled Harry into an embrace. Before Harry could say a word, he was sucked away into a the uncomfortable sensation of side-along apparition.

They reappeared elsewhere, somewhere infinitely warmer. Harry was able to take in the surroundings of his bedroom at Malfoy Manor for only a second before a wave of magic forced him to barrel backwards and he landed ungracefully on his back on his bed.

Harry propped himself up in time to see Voldemort doing some wandless magic. With a flick of his wrists, Harry saw their clothing all appear in a pile on the floor—*ah, so they weren't totally vanished then, wonderful*—as well as, with a stab of relief, their wands. Those Voldemort did not send falling to the ground like unneeded garments, though. Harry's went to land on the vanity while the Deathstick, ominous, long thing that it was, came to settle in Voldemort's outstretched hand.

He pointed it at Harry.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked, prepared to bolt from the bed.

"Giving you a gift," Voldemort answered cryptically. A flash of magic, something greenish-blue, shot from the tip. Harry tried to dodge it, he did, but Voldemort's spell was fast, and it hit him in the leg.

Harry closed his eyes and waited for something dramatic and terrible to happen. Seconds passed. When he opened his eyes, he noticed nothing different.

Except the fact that Voldemort was now infinitely closer, standing at the side of his bed and looking down at him amusedly. "What did you do?" Harry asked.

Voldemort set his wand down on his bedside table. Harry resisted the

urge to snatch it. “Allow me to show you,” Voldemort said in a lilting voice.

He moved slowly, oddly gracefully, as he came onto the bed beside Harry, who had frozen in uncertainty. Voldemort straddled his hips, and when he lowered his hands to slowly graze his chest, Harry could have moaned at that touch alone.

It just felt so *good.*

It was like every physical sensation had been amplified by ten. Where once such gentle touches would have felt only mildly pleasant, now they felt amazing, almost too nice. Harry’s back arched like a cat’s when his hands went to his stomach, and he almost didn’t care that Voldemort laughed at the action.

“This is unfair,” Harry breathed. Wasn’t the connection between their souls enough? He didn’t need to stoop to something like this. There was already *plenty* of pleasure there.

“Unfair?” Voldemort trailed one hand along the scar on Harry’s chest, the memory of the locket burned into his skin forever. “This is not a game nor a tactic, Harry, it is merely a reward… enjoy it.”

Harry frowned—it was never *not* a game or tactic with Voldemort—but then he ran his hands over his shoulders and down his arms, and he thought, *fuck it.* It felt so nice; whatever that spell had done to him, it made Voldemort’s caresses feel like the most magical and intimate of massages. Harry felt aches and pains he didn’t even know were there were drain out of him, making him feel more relaxed than he’d ever been.

“Good, Harry…”

Harry’s eyes fluttered and closed as Voldemort’s hands went back to his chest, then his stomach, then his waist…

“Mmm…”

When Voldemort started massaging his cock—and evidently some other magic was at play here, for it felt slick and warm as well as intense—Harry’s eyes rolled back, lost in the sensations of it all. This was definitely a tactic. Harry was pretty sure he would do whatever the fuck Voldemort wanted, whenever, if it meant that this wouldn’t stop.

Voldemort laughed again, a soft sound, but Harry didn't care. He was, amazingly, hard again, his breath quickening as Voldemort used both hands to stroke and tease him.

Harry's eyes drifted open. In the reflection above him, he could see Voldemort's body over his; he could see the hazy lust in his eyes.

His red, red eyes.

"Ah… fuck, slower—"

Voldemort paused. "Slower?" he repeated with a crooked smile. "Already?"

Harry glared, tempted to point out that he had barely managed to last longer than a fucking minute back in the cave—but he didn't. Harry only bit his lower lip and glowered.

He was surprised when Voldemort returned his angry stare. "Is that what you think?" he asked.

Fuck, Harry thought. He supposed Voldemort had heard that spiteful speculation, then.

He wasn't granted the opportunity to say anything else. Voldemort did the opposite of what Harry had requested—he moved faster, stroking his length and teasing the head and—

Harry stared in shock when Voldemort shifted, lowering himself at the end of Harry's bed so that he was—but he wouldn't—

The Dark Lord's eyes flashed a bloody red, never leaving Harry's as he slowly and purposefully dragged his tongue along Harry's now throbbing, aching cock.

That sight and sensation alone was more than enough—before he'd even made it the whole way up, Harry hips bucked and he came, throwing his head back and moaning loudly. Voldemort's magic gleamed and he never stopped stroking him, working Harry through his second orgasm in ten minutes that was powerful enough to make him see white.

He continued to caress him afterwards, too; Harry's cock twitched as he continued to come, dripping onto Voldemort's fingers. Voldemort didn't seem bothered by it. On the contrary, he seemed fascinated by everything about Harry's body.

“St-stop,” Harry panted, trying and failing to shift away from his grasp. “It’s too—ah, too much, too sensi—ahh–”

He hissed sharply when Voldemort continued to touch him anyway. When he jerked again, Voldemort let him go, smirking all the while.

Harry fell back on the bed, panting hard. He was utterly and completely spent.

Voldemort shifted closer to him, and Harry paid attention to his magic for the first time since he’d started stroking him.

Oh, no.

“I c-can’t,” Harry stuttered, and he meant it. He thought he might fall apart if Voldemort tried to get anything else out of him—he had nothing left. Not to mention… he didn’t really know what to do, anyway.

He may have acted like he knew what he was doing earlier at the Ministry… but the reality was that he didn’t have a fucking clue, and he had always been banking on Voldemort losing control and taking the lead.

“Can’t you, Harry?”

Voldemort’s magic wrapped around him, pulling him towards him until, Harry was shocked to see, *he* was the one straddling *Voldemort*.

Harry froze there, petrified.

“Wh-what—I d-don’t—”

“Let me show you,” Voldemort said. He ran his hands along Harry’s arms, his magic dark and glinting. “Let me in, Harry…”

Harry wasn’t sure what he meant at first. Then he felt a familiar sensation, and it became abundantly clear.

It was like something was coiling on him, in him, within him… that serpent that was both a separate being and yet apart of him, unintelligible but undeniable…

He was trying to possess him again.

Harry stared at Voldemort, who laid on his back below him, looking as pleading and vulnerable as Harry had ever seen him. He was gently

holding onto Harry's wrists, and Harry could hear him clearly in his mind:

Let me, Harry… please.

Was it just because he'd pleaded? Essentially begging him, Harry, for something for once? Or was it because it was a relief, to let Voldemort control him?

Did he want to let him?

Manipulation, said that very small but smart voice in the back of Harry's head. *This is an obvious manipulation. He just wants to see what it's like to possess you, wholly and truly. To really own you, even if it's just for a moment.*

Harry decided to ignore it, to not dwell on the why. Feeling foolish, he did not resist Voldemort as he took over.

Harry felt him, fully present in his body, and when his arm moved, it was not he, Harry, who moved it… but he allowed it, and no pain came, no unfathomable agony…

It was as natural as breathing, moving like this…

Harry was still watching Voldemort through his own eyes, examining his body below him as his hands moved on their own, down his torso which he was able to admire fully for the first time, clearly and unabashedly… He was as pale as the moon, muscular but not as muscular as Harry might have thought. He could see the Dark Lord's ribs a little too clearly, his hip bones jutting out just a bit too much to look entirely healthy… Harry was filled with something like affection, then, for it made him seem infinitely more… human…

Voldemort was guiding his hands down to his long, hard cock, and with him in control, it was easy, not being nervous…

It was exhilarating to say the least, seeing how Voldemort's face melted when Harry's fingers grazed him, letting the Dark Lord show him just how he liked to be touched, just how much pressure to use, just how fast or slow to go. The same magic he'd used before sparked to life, and a sudden slickness made the movements easier, and Voldemort's eyes closed and he moaned…

Harry didn't feel nervous at all, anymore. After just a minute of having Voldemort control his movements, he felt braver than he

probably should have. *Let me,* he thought, pushing against the influence of the Dark Lord in his mind. *Let me do it.*

Voldemort slowly opened his eyes, his pupils blown with lust. His magic was deeply pleased, and with the slightest nod of recognition, he released his hold on Harry's body.

At first, it felt like he'd just been pushed onto a stage where a second ago he'd been shielded behind the curtain. Harry only faltered for a moment—he quickly began moving exactly as he had when Voldemort had been in control, and was pleased to see that the Dark Lord responded with a gratified, soft moan…

Harry definitely understood the appeal, then, of being the one in control.

He moved faster, tightening his grip slightly, only to soften it a moment later. What's more, Harry could tell just how effective he was or wasn't by the way Voldemort's magic reacted—it would glisten and coil when he did something that must have been particularly good, and so Harry was holding back a laugh himself when, soon enough, he had the Dark Lord panting, close to the edge at Harry Potter's hand, who he was certain would always be better at pleasing Lord Voldemort than Voldemort would *ever* be at pleasing himself.

It was not long before he was clearly on the precipice. One of Voldemort's hands twisted in the sheets, another action that was so entirely human that Harry committed the moment to memory, before his magic coiled tighter, too tightly—

Voldemort groaned, deep and loud, and Harry, being the one lording over him for once, was able to appreciate every second of it. He didn't know what was more engrossing to watch—the Dark Lord's face breaking with pleasure, his hands gripping so harshly at nothing, or his throbbing cock as he came in his hands, spurting out onto him as he didn't pause for a second, uncaring.

It was disturbingly lovely to witness, Harry hated to admit. It made him feel supremely powerful.

Voldemort was not like Harry, though. When it was over, he did not collapse or wait to see what Harry would say or do. Instead he sat up, so abrupt that Harry almost yelped, and crashed his lips against Harry's in a painful, demanding kiss.

This, came his voice, resounding in Harry's mind, *is what you have with*

me, Harry… this is what we are.

He was ravaging his mouth unapologetically. It didn't seem to bother either of them that their spend was everywhere, in the sheets and on their hands, still *inside* Harry, he knew. Voldemort fell back, taking Harry with him and all but throwing him beside him on the bed. He stared into his eyes, red boring into red.

"You will never have this with anyone else," Voldemort said. He moved to kiss Harry's shoulder in a jarringly sweet fashion; the light between them was now soft. A gentle warmth.

Harry didn't see a reason to argue that. "I know."

"Never," Voldemort reiterated. He pulled Harry close to his chest, like he thought—like he thought what? That Harry might get up and run away?

"You are mine," he murmured. Though his magic was now gleaming in gold, happy and satisfied, it still had darkness. Possessiveness lived there, obvious in the pockets of black.

Harry, however, had finally met his limit. His head felt heavy as Voldemort held him there, captive against his chest. "Uh huh," he said, failing to stifle a yawn. He supposed he hadn't really slept last night at all, had he…

"My horcrux," Voldemort went on. Harry wondered who he was trying to convince. "Mine…"

"Mmm," Harry hummed thoughtfully. He was so warm…

Harry closed his eyes and burrowed his head against him, feeling far too comfortable. He knew he would be revisiting this experience with an onslaught of shame and other horrible emotions soon, but, well… that was a problem for later…

"Forever…"

Harry lost his ability to focus, and drifted off while the Dark Lord held him close, whispering words into the air and carding his fingers through his hair.

Chapter End Notes

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At first, Harry was uncertain if he was really awake or not. He felt warm and heavy, and the soft pulsing of light cascading throughout his body was enough to feel like he was in a dream. But when he opened his eyes, he knew this to be the waking world.

Voldemort, however, was very much asleep.

The Dark Lord's magic was swaying slightly, a back and forth motion that reminded Harry of a slow and steady pulse. He still had his arms wrapped around him possessively, but his limbs were loose. A good thing, too, or this position would have been far too stifling for Harry's liking. As it was, he was only trapped in a gentle hold, one which Harry was certain he could break free from if he wanted.

He didn't think that would be wise.

To move now would mean waking him, and was that something he wanted to risk? Voldemort almost never slept; surely he should stay and let him do so for as long as possible? A well rested Voldemort was undoubtedly a better one than the sleep deprived creature he usually was. If he moved, no longer touching him and therefore likely ending the light blooming between them, Voldemort would wake. Harry was the only reason he'd been able to fall asleep in the first place, he was certain.

An interesting potential point of power, Harry thought. If he could get the Dark Lord used to and enjoying the occasional good night's sleep, that would be… useful.

Except, it wasn't exactly night, was it? Harry wasn't sure what time it was, but he got the sense that it was midday. The thought made him smile. He imagined the Dark Lord had planned on being… productive, today. He had, afterall, started it with a meeting with Dolores Umbridge at the Ministry. Harry hoped he had many, many important appointments he'd scheduled, lots of scary and deplorable meetings lined up, and that he had now missed them all.

Shifting ever so slightly—Voldemort's magic did not react in any way that he had felt him move, nor did his body—Harry looked across the bed. It was a mess. *He* was a mess. He glanced only briefly at himself in the mirror above the bed, but that was enough to tell him that. He looked and felt like someone who had been thoroughly… well, he

looked rough. It was mostly in his hair, if he was being honest. It had never looked more wild.

Voldemort, somehow, looked…

Perfect.

Harry hated that the word sprung into his head, but it did. The Dark Lord's face had never looked more serene. With his eyes closed and his face relaxed, he did not at all look like some evil, sociopathic wizard determined to rule the world. He looked…

Beautiful. Peaceful.

Harry marveled for a moment at the stillness of his face as he slowly breathed; at the smooth, pale skin over his high cheekbones and his full, currently slightly parted, lips. His hair was somehow still neat, which Harry found a tad offensive, and made a note to rectify next time.

Next time.

Harry didn't want to think about it yet. It was easy not to, with that gentle, pulsing warmth radiating through him. In fact, he thought he might fall back asleep…

Harry barely stifled another yawn before catching sight of something that made him open his eyes wide again.

The Elder Wand.

It was sitting there, right there, on his bedside table. If he lifted the Dark Lord's arm and rolled a bit further to his left, he would be able to grab it.

Should I?

Harry felt a thrill of terror and adrenaline at the very idea; he was glad that Voldemort was so deeply asleep. It would be disastrous if he could perceive Harry's thoughts right now.

I could.

Harry stared at the Deathstick, his mind racing at the possibilities. What would happen if he were to grab it? It was, rightfully, he knew… his. That wand would be loyal to him, because he had disarmed Draco Malfoy. He was its master.

The Master.

He would be, wouldn't he? Harry bit his lower lip so hard it hurt. He already had the ring and the cloak. All he needed was to secure the wand which he had won over, and…

Then what?

What would happen, if and when Harry came into possession of all three Hallows? Something spectacular? Nothing at all? Was it true that the holder of the three hallows would become all-powerful, a true master of death, or was it just some childhood story? Grindelwald had believed the former, and for a time, so had Dumbledore…

Harry's hand twitched and it inched forward. His heart pounded as he imagined reaching out, grabbing it…

Reckless.

The voice that rang in the back of his head this time sounded much too much like Hermione. Harry dropped his hand. What he did know for certain was that if he, right here and now, moved out of Voldemort's arms and grabbed his wand… all of this would be lost.

The Dark Lord would never again have this kind of blind, almost absurd amount of trust, to let himself fall asleep like this in Harry's presence. This opportunity, this fragile space where Voldemort allowed himself to be vulnerable, would be gone forever.

Despite his best efforts, a small part of him finally registered the gravity of that thought—that this, right here, was undoubtedly about to become a regular part of his life—but Harry could not focus on that right now. He could not yet face just what had occurred, and the consequential result that he had likely entered into a permanent fucking arrangement with Lord Voldemort, because there was simply no way that the Dark Lord was not going to expect and demand that they do this again… probably often.

Oh God, what will Snape say?

Harry also forced away the very unwelcome image of a dead Severus Snape intensely judging him. He focused instead on this—the situation he was in now, with a sleeping Dark Lord in his bed. Voldemort himself, resting and trustful and probably the closest he'd felt to feeling human and whole since he'd created his first horcrux. Right now, in this moment, he might even feel… safe.

This was not worth losing.

Especially not over something that is likely nothing at all, said the Hermione-voice.

But that didn't mean that he shouldn't *consider* the possibility that something extraordinary could happen if he acquired all the hallows. If becoming Master of Death *was* significant—something magical and true that would give him powers related to death; what did it mean to be its master?—then he had to at least think about it. He would need a plan, too. Right now was indeed far too reckless to attempt to explore it. He might get to the wand in time, but he'd never get to both the ring and the cloak before Voldemort fully awoke and all hell broke loose. Harry could only imagine the Dark Lord's rage upon waking up to discover Harry stealing the Deathstick. It would not be pretty.

So, Harry would have to move quickly, if he ever wanted to attempt to stealthily become the true Master of Death. If it were this sort of situation—and Harry could think of no other time Voldemort would be without the wand on him, very much conscious—he would need to already have the ring on, probably, and need to have the cloak close. How on earth he would ever be able to expose that he had the ring—only a broken horcrux, as far as Voldemort knew—and to be allowed to wear it, Harry had no idea… It would probably never happen…

Harry's thoughts began to slow as Voldemort let out a particularly low, long exhale. Harry wasn't sure if it was his relaxing magic or the fact that, maybe, Voldemort was still draining him a bit, peaceful and gentle as this was, but he felt himself growing tired again, too. His thoughts of death and plots of power slipped into nothingness, and he drifted off to sleep once more.

The next time Harry awoke, he was significantly colder, despite being covered in a blanket. He blinked slowly, and as consciousness washed over him it was apparent at once that Voldemort was gone. There was no pulsing warmth of their bond, nor the heat of another body close by. His robes and the Deathstick were gone. Harry slowly sat up, unsure if this absence was welcome or not.

What was welcome was the fact that everything was clean. The sheets and his body no longer had any… evidence of what happened covering them. That was nice, Harry thought… until he imagined what Voldemort must have thought as *he* woke up while he, Harry,

still slept.

The image made his face flush with embarrassment.

What had the Dark Lord mused upon waking? What thoughts raced through his head while he undoubtedly stared at his slumbering human horcrux? And then he had decided to clean everything up, and… and tuck him in again before leaving…

Harry's face burned even hotter. How ridiculous, he thought, that the notion of the Dark Lord putting a blanket on him made him feel almost as flustered as recalling everything that had occurred before they'd fallen asleep.

Before.

Harry rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, his heart pounding as he was no longer able to ignore the flashes from the morning. He and Voldmeort had really… They had… And *he* had…

Nope.

Harry threw the blanket aside and checked the time. It was four in the afternoon, and so far all he'd done was have a great deal of sex and sleep for hours. Probably what most would consider a great day, but which Harry was doing his best to compartmentalize and ignore. He would have to channel his inner Draco Malfoy, he mused…

Oh hell. The Malfoys.

What did they think was going on? Surely they were wondering where he was? Maybe not; Voldemort had told them he was taking Harry to the Ministry that morning, after all… maybe they thought he was still there. Maybe Voldemort had even gone as far as to tell them some other lie…

Just as he had that thought, Harry noticed it. A slip of rolled-up parchment on the bedside table, just a few inches from where the Deathstick had previously laid. Feeling absurdly nervous about it, Harry grabbed it and unfurled the scroll.

You were feeling unwell after your Ministry visit, where we met with Dolores Umbridge.

The purpose of our visit was to discuss her progress and work ethic, which ultimately resulted in the impending removal of Fred and George Weasley

from her service and giving her alternative support instead. Starting next week, the Weasley twins will be placed under the service of Allister Blackwell.

Orders were given to leave you completely undisturbed until you wish to resurface.

Harry rapidly read the note two, three times. His eyes trailed over the script that he knew was undoubtedly that of Lord Voldemort's.

No. Tom Riddle's.

Harry had sudden and fierce flashbacks of writing in a diary, of corresponding with a teenage version of the Dark Lord. His handwriting had not changed at all.

A strange surge of guilt swelled in his chest, but before Harry could fully process it, he nearly screamed. The script had begun to glow a dull red. Then, a second later, the entire note went up in flames. It was completely gone before Harry could even be concerned with being burned. There were no ashes left behind, nothing. Harry's scar prickled, then stopped.

Harry's heart was beating so hard he could feel it against his chest. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself.

Voldemort had left him a note. An enchanted note, it seemed, that was set to self-destruct once it had been read… and probably notify him in some way that it had been read, too. Harry guessed that was why his scar had just prickled—Voldemort briefly… checking in, he supposed.

Harry swallowed hard. He realized that he was extremely thirsty. Hungry, too. His stomach groaned in sudden protest.

Harry stood and decided he could put at least one of those off for the moment. He went to the vanity. His clothes, which had been rustled and shredded just hours ago, were now clean, whole, and folded nicely… and his wand—formerly Voldemort's—was resting on top of them…

Panic swept through Harry. Heart in his throat, he snatched up his robes, digging into his pockets—

Oh, thank Merlin.

The Resurrection Ring was still there.

Harry felt light-headed with relief. Not that he would expect Voldemort to think about digging through his pockets, but still. Harry was grateful to whatever higher powers that he had not. He held the ring to his chest and sighed.

Where should he keep it now?

Harry glanced around his room, wondering if there was a single spot that was secretive enough. He suddenly missed his mokeskin bag more than he could bear.

Under his bed? Far too easy. In the vanity drawer? No, too simple, too easily found…

After pacing his room for a few stressful minutes, Harry decided to not leave it there at all, but put it back in his robe pocket which he decided he would be wearing again today. Until he could think of a good place for safe-keeping, he resigned to keeping it on him at all times. If he could do it with his wand, he figured, he could do it with this.

Harry refolded the robes and set them back on the vanity. Though he knew there was no one else who could have done it—Harry was certain that the Dark Lord would not even trust a subservient house-elf to this kind of secrecy—Harry was shocked to think that Lord Voldemort had. Cleaning the bed, repairing and folding his clothes… *Leaving a note*…

Shaking his head in disbelief, Harry grabbed his wand. He took a moment to recall some basic magic that he hadn't needed to use in a long time, then transfigured a comb on the vanity into a relatively decent glass. "*Aguamenti*," he said afterwards, and the glass filled with liquid. Harry drank it all, then repeated the process and drank another glass, too. He set the cup down, certain that his spellwork hadn't been that great and that it would revert back into a comb in a few minutes.

Harry avoided looking at himself in the mirror.

He went to the bathroom, because even though he'd been magicked clean, he still felt the very powerful need to bathe. Food, he told his growling stomach, could wait until after.

He didn't even know how long he stood under the stream of hot water, letting the heat cleanse his skin and clear his head. In the privacy of his own bathroom (and feeling certain that Voldemort had returned to using Occlumency against him now that he knew Harry

was awake, well, and had read his hand-written, incendiary note), he finally allowed his thoughts to stray to what happened just hours ago.

Part of him could not really believe that it happened at all. His body felt completely normal—an effect of drinking the Elixir of Life, he knew. Otherwise Harry was certain that he would be feeling thoroughly abused.

But there was no denying what they'd done. What *he'd* done.

I had… a lot of sex with Lord Voldemort. And I did not…. exactly… hate it.

In fact, Harry thought, now furiously scrubbing at his scalp, *I kind of… I really enjoyed it.*

Harry's face grew warm in a way that had nothing at all to do with the hot shower.

There was no use denying it at this point, Harry recognized. After all, he would only be lying to himself, and what good could come of that?

I had sex with Voldemort. My captor, the darkest wizard of all time, the man who murdered my parents and very much tried to murder me… a lot… and…

Harry rested his forehead against the marble wall of the shower. He remembered exactly how it had felt, exactly what he had done, allowing himself to be bent over that basin and fucked until he literally couldn't see straight anymore.

And he'd loved every second of it.

Gods, is this just—is that who I am? Harry thought in despair. He turned and leaned his back against the wall now, letting the hot water wash over his chest. *Am I that masochistic? That sad? Am I doomed to be the kind of person who… who begs and demands like that?*

He ran his hands down his face, then reached for some soap and began vigorously scrubbing every inch of his body again. *No,* he thought stubbornly. *No, that's not who I am at all. I was just… like that at that moment. Because he was right. I do feel guilty. I hate that most of his soul is… is dead, and that I'm the cause of it. I hate it more than I can bear.*

But you can't allow yourself to feel guilty about it forever, chimed in the

Hermione-voice. *It wasn't your fault.*

Annoying as it was to hear, Harry was grateful for whatever part of his subconscious was inventing it. Surely he could never talk to the real Hermione about this, which was a shame, because she would probably give the best advice.

And this faux-version of her was right; he could not allow himself to feel guilty forever. He had only done what he'd been told to do, what he thought he had to do. Dumbledore had not ever allowed him to believe, not for a second, that saving Voldemort was an option.

I may be insane for thinking he still can be, Harry lamented. *He could never have his own whole soul back, but he could…*

He could what? Share Harry's? Was that what was happening, essentially? And what would be the long-term ramifications of that? Maybe *that* was something he could talk to Hermione about, at least.

Harry sighed as he rinsed the soap from his body. As he shut the shower off, he found it amazing that he was able to put the encounter in the cave from his mind as easily as it was. Maybe he was just that hungry; maybe he was just getting better at compartmentalizing after all… Draco would be so proud…

Ah, right, Draco. Hadn't he said he was having his friends over tonight, in the manor, and that Harry was invited to join them? And he had said he would…

Well, at least it's something to take my mind off of everything, Harry thought. He could use an excuse to drink after everything that happened. God, he couldn't wait until Hermione and Ron were back!

Heaving another heavy sigh, Harry got out of the shower and dried himself off. He supposed he should leave his room soon—he wouldn't want to worry Narcissa needlessly, and besides, he was starved. Harry got dressed, checking several times to ensure that the ring was, indeed, still in his pocket.

He thought for a moment to summon him, as Snape would undoubtedly have a lot to say about the mess Harry now found himself in. But he couldn't do it. It was too soon, too fresh, and besides. Harry did not like the idea of facing Snape on an empty stomach.

Instead, Harry left the ring where it was, deep in his robe pocket.

Before leaving his room, he caught sight of something unexpected—the comb that he had transfigured was still very much a tall glass. His spell was lasting much longer than he had anticipated, and that, for some reason, made Harry feel much better about himself.

"Drink this."

Draco Malfoy slid a glass across the bar towards him, one that was filled with something dark and ominous looking. It was smoking slightly, too, which made Harry more than a little hesitant… but not hesitant enough. He lifted it to his lips and took a sip.

After having a filling and satisfactory dinner, they were back in the game room, the one where Draco had first brought Harry after they'd learned about Ron and Hermione's engagement. The Malfoy heir was clearly in his element—he was dressed nicely but comfortably, and his magic was a cool sheen about him, silvery and calm. It would be a little while before Goyle, Greengrass, Zabini, and Parkinson arrived, Draco had said, and Harry wondered if this was by design. Maybe he had planned all along to get Harry alone and a little drunk before his friends appeared. A ploy to put him in a more agreeable mood before dealing with the Slytherins, Harry supposed. It wasn't the worst idea Draco had ever had.

Harry grimaced after he sipped the mysterious concoction. It tasted like some mixture of ashes and obviously alcohol, yet wasn't entirely disgusting—there was a semi-sweet aftertaste that made it bearable. "What is this?" he asked.

"*Conbusit*," Draco answered. "It's a kind of brandy. Made with Dirigible Plums fermented in casks of oak that have been lightly burned by the flames produced by a Chimera. Made in France. Well, aged in France. The wood gets imported from Greece, obviously."

"Obviously," Harry murmured. Then he smirked. "Dirigible Plums?"

"Yes. You can tell?"

"Not really. I was just thinking of the Lovegoods… Luna wore them as earrings, once, and almost in a headdress to a Slug Club party… Luckily she left it behind, though."

Draco scowled. "Of course she did," he muttered. Then he scoffed. "The *Slug Club* parties…"

Harry almost laughed at how sour he looked. “Still bitter that you weren’t invited?Don’t you think that’s all moot, now?”

“Of course I’m still bitter,” Draco snapped. “I should have been invited. Would have been, too, had he continued his little Slug Club in our seventh year. The tides had turned by then. But I guess Slughorn wasn’t in the mood to throw parties once it was obvious the Dark Lord was winning…”

“Gee,” Harry said dully. “I can’t imagine why not.”

Draco shrugged. “There were other parties. And they were much more fun. You missed out on the real Hogwarts partying.”

“Yeah, I imagine I did,” Harry said. “Like watching older students torture younger ones for breaking rules so they could practice their Unforgiveables. Assuming they weren’t pureblood children, of course.”

Draco took a sip of his smoky drink and shook his head. “I meant things like the Blood Ball we had on Halloween,” he said, choosing to largely ignore Harry’s comment. “Or any of the Slytherin parties, really. We were able to get away with quite a lot in our house.”

“Shocking,” Harry muttered. Then, “The what ball?”

“The Blood Ball.” Draco smiled, leaning over the bar and looking wistful. “The very first annual. Ah, what a night.”

“Let me guess,” Harry drawled. “The Blood Ball was a dance purely celebrating the purity of the Pureblood witches and wizards at Hogwarts.”

“Obviously. It was excellent.”

“Sounds like the most ridiculous waste of an event I’ve ever heard of,” said Harry. “Why bother? Wouldn’t only a third of the school be able to go, anyway? If that?”

“Oh no, everyone could attend if you were third-year and up. It was practically mandatory, really. What? You look surprised. It was. Who else would we have to show off to if the half-bloods and less couldn’t come?”

Harry was saved from coming up with an indignant response by a rapping on the door. They both turned as it swung open, and Binny appeared, bowing low. “Mister Goyle and Mister Zabini have arrived,

Master Malfoy."

Draco pursed his lips. "They're early… Fine, bring them in."

Binny disappeared with a *pop*.

"Are you going to play nice tonight, Potter?" Malfoy asked. He then downed his drink, setting an empty glass on the table.

Harry tried not to roll his eyes. "I always play nice, Malfoy." He drained his own drink—he swore he nearly exhaled smoke afterwards, the taste was so strong—and slid the empty glass towards Malfoy. He refilled both.

"I thought you must not tell lies."

Draco looked like he regretted saying it the moment he did. His magic froze up, making Harry think of a prey animal that had just heard the ominous sound of a branch snapping. Harry was more shocked than offended. Then, to both his and Draco's surprise, he found that he was laughing rather than getting angry.

"Fair enough," Harry said. He opened and closed his right hand, watching the way all the scarred words he'd acquired became a little more visible:

I must not tell lies.

Harry James Potter.

"I'll play nice tonight," he said. Malfoy passed him another full drink, where Harry caught it with his scarred hand. Smoke danced along the rim. "As long as they do."

Draco did not look reassured. Harry could hear footsteps down the hall. "Just try not to hex anyone when you get all fussed now that you have a wand on you," Draco said.

"You mean the one that used to be the Dark Lord's wand?"

Draco's reaction was sudden and comical—he had clearly momentarily forgotten that this was, indeed, the wand Harry now had on him. He paled and his magic shimmered in discomfort.

Harry himself wasn't sure if he wanted to reveal that to anyone else or not. He didn't really have a good way of explaining how he had become so favored… But, well, maybe he didn't need one. Maybe

being Harry Potter was a good enough reason for people not to question any more, at this point. He'd already been 'blessed' with getting Voldemort's red eyes, after all… and Greengrass had told him it would soon be clear to everyone that Harry was now firmly in Voldemort's good graces…

They already know I can speak parseltongue, Harry reminded himself. Maybe it would not be the worst thing to reveal yet another trait that so obviously tied him to power…

Power. If he wanted to change anything in this new, horrible world, Harry had to have it.

He was still mulling it over when Blaise Zabini and Gregory Goyle came around the corner, led by Binny to the game room. Harry smiled cheerfully from where he sat at the bar; Malfoy did, too, but his magic was still stirring in unease. They assessed Harry coolly but respectably as they approached.

"Drinks," Malfoy said, bypassing all pleasantries. He poured two more generous glasses and handed them each to Zabini and Goyle, who took them with silent nods of approval. "To the New Regime," Draco said, lifting his own glass.

Harry almost snorted—was that the normal thing to cheers to, now?—but raised his glass all the same. *Playing nice,* he thought sourly. "To the New Regime," Goyle and Zabini echoed.

But Harry couldn't help himself after all. "To progress," he said instead, because that felt infinitely better to him. The others cast him looks that varied from approval to suspicion, but none of them questioned it. They all downed their drinks in one go. Harry tasted ashes on his tongue and sweetness on his lips.

A Gathering of Friends

Harry, Malfoy, Goyle and Zabini lowered their glasses at the same time. Malfoy refilled them before anyone could so much as draw a breath afterwards, pouring the dark liquid in generous amounts until the bottle was empty.

“Binny!” he snapped. He tossed the bottle towards the tiny elf unnecessarily hard, earning some sniggers from his friends when Binny nearly fell over. “Bring us another from the cellar. Binny bowed and disappeared.

Harry glanced at each of the Slytherins, his eyes narrowing as he took in the way they smirked, their magic each writhing around them in amusement. “Why is that so enjoyable to you all?”

“Why’s what enjoyable? Drinking?” asked Goyle, who then took another large gulp of his drink.

“No. Treating your house-elves like utter shit.”

Their magic all stilled at what Harry was sure they considered an absurd question. “What are you on about, Potter?” Zabini said, his jewel-like aura deepening inquisitively. “Draco was just giving his elf a command. That’s what they’re here for. It’s what they like.”

“That wasn’t all he did, and you know it,” Harry said. “He chucked that empty bottle at him, nearly knocking him over, and you all had a little laugh about it.”

They exchanged uncomfortable glances. Draco shrugged and said, “It would take a lot more than that to hurt a house-elf. Don’t worry about Binny, Harry—they’re resilient little creatures.”

“I know exactly how resilient a house-elf can be, *Draco,*” Harry said coldly. “And I’ve seen exactly what it takes to hurt one. Kill one, even. So have you.”

The air between them grew chilly; beside them, Goyle and Zabini visibly tensed. Harry was sure Malfoy was reliving the exact same moment in his mind right then—Dobby, apparating back into his old masters’ manor, risking everything to save them…

Disapparating just as a dagger stabbed him in the chest.

Malfoy's expression became strained, his magic shaken. Harry's hand tightened on his drink. *So much for playing nice.*

"But it's not about that," Harry said, speaking in a much more conversational tone. He even smiled. "Obviously you can't hurt a house-elf *that* easily… physically, anyway. But why treat them so poorly? Do you really find it funny? Or does it make you feel big, or something? To be such an arse."

"It's not about that either, *Harry*," Malfoy said through gritted teeth. "It's about power. A house-elf always needs to remember its place. There is a hierarchy, and wizards are at the top. Always. House-elves in particular need to remember why it is us they are loyal to."

Harry couldn't help the laughter that escaped his lips. "Oh, it's about their loyalty, is it? You really think that making them fear you is the best way to go about that? Even after everything you've been through? *Draco?"*

Harry grinned, feeling he was doing Malfoy a kindness by not elaborating. He could only assume that he had not told his friends exactly how his family had lost Dobby in the first place: Harry Potter, his nemesis, inserting an old sock into the destroyed diary, tricking his father into freeing him.

"There are better ways, in my opinion," Harry finished.

"What do you mean?" Zabini asked. His magic was swirling with curiosity again.

"I would think it's obvious," said Harry. "Sure, you can make people obey you by making them fear you… but if you want true loyalty, it has to be earned—just like respect. You would have much better luck earning true loyalty from Binny if you were kind to him, Draco. If he, you know, actually liked you."

"Binny is as loyal to me as he possibly could be," Draco scoffed.

"Oh yeah? Are you so sure? Perhaps we should test your theory out… I've only spent a fraction of the time with Binny that you have. If I were to give him an order that directly defied one of yours—for example, if I were to tell him to return the liquor you sent him to retrieve for you—who do you think he would obey? Me or you?"

It was very satisfying, watching the way Draco's magic writhed and his expression became stony. Even more satisfying was the way both

his supposed friends' auras danced merrily, almost greedily. Obviously, the thought of seeing Draco's elf disobey him in favor of someone else's command was nothing but funny to them.

Some friends, Harry thought. *Snakes, the whole lot of them.*

Binny reappeared. In his tiny hands was the new bottle of *Conbusit.* He hovered it onto the bar in front of Draco, saying, "You's drink, sir."

Harry and Draco locked eyes. Every single thing about Draco's body language and magic said the same thing: *Don't you dare.*

Harry smiled merrily. "Thank you, Binny," he said. The elf bowed and disappeared.

Draco's smirk looked confident, as though he had known all along that Harry wouldn't do it, but his magic revealed how relieved he really was. "Decided not to make a fool of yourself, eh, Potter?"

"No, I just didn't want him to take this fine booze away," Harry said. Zabini and Goyle laughed as he pulled the bottle towards him and topped off his drink. "And I thought it was Harry, now."

"Ah. Of course. *Harry."* Draco refilled his glass once Harry was done, then poured more into Zabini's and Goyle's while he was at it. "Old habits die hard."

"Fuckin' ridiculous," Goyle muttered. "You two, acting like chums."

"We are chums," Harry said dryly.

"The best of chums," Draco agreed, his voice much brighter. "Couldn't ask for a better chum if I wanted."

"Stop, it's too beautiful," Zabini drawled. "If you carry on like this I may be sick."

"Please. You haven't drunk nearly enough yet to be sick," Draco said.

"I'll work on that now."

Another *crack* announced Binny's arrival again. "You's other guests is being here, Master Malfoy," he said.

"Bring them back, then."

Binny bowed and disappeared. "Who else is coming?" Harry asked.

“The ladies, of course. What? Why the look of disappointment, Harry?” Draco smirked. “My apologies if you find witches offensive.”

Goyle sniggered loudly, and while Zabini said nothing, he was smirking as well. Harry hated that this managed to make his face grow warm. He hated it more that he wasn’t sure what to say to that—he ran through a few retorts quickly in his head, and they all sounded equally stupid. He shook his head and drank instead.

The door to the game room was swinging open just moments later. Unsurprisingly, Pansy Parkison and Daphne Greengrass entered. Surprisingly, Milicent Bulstrode was with them, an entity Harry had not seen—or noticed, at any rate—since their sixth year at Hogwarts. Had she always been so massive? She must have been nearly as tall as he was, and at least twice as wide, looking as though she was mostly muscle. She reminded him of Dudley in female form. She dwarfed her much smaller counterparts, Parkinson and Daphne, who seemed dainty in comparison.

All of this made Bulstrode’s magic shocking. It was a very soft aura; a fluffy, off-white that made Harry think of pillows and cotton. Or a bunny, even, he thought with amusement. Not at all what he would have imagined for someone like Milicent Bulstrode, who he once recalled having Hermione in a headlock during what was supposed to be a non-contact duel.

Harry closed his eyes and took a moment to appreciate all the different magical auras now in the room. On one side, Bulsrode’s soft white besides Parkinson’s seaweed green and Daphne’s frothy aqua. One the other, closer to him, was Malfoy’s silvery sheen, Zabini’s jewel-like blue, and Goyle’s stonelike gray. They were each lovely in their own way, Harry had to admit; even Parkinson’s semi-slimy magic was not that abhorrent when she wasn’t being cruel, it seemed… but then, he doubted there was any kind of magic that was entirely bad.

Except maybe Voldemort’s, when it had been nothing but blackness.

“Miss Parkinson, Miss Bulstrode, and Miss Greengrass,” Binny announced unnecessarily.

The three witches entered, and Malfoy smiled warmly as they did. “Welcome, ladies. What can my house-elf get you to drink? Unless you’d like to join us in having some *Conbusit?*”

“I would,” said Bulstrode. She took a seat beside Goyle as Malfoy got

her a glass and filled it, and Harry could tell at once that she and Goyle had some sort of romantic relationship. Or, at least, something was going on—she blushed when she sat and his magic bounced about in a very un-Goyle-like manner. Harry wasn't sure if he found that sickening, cute, or both, somehow.

"No, I prefer wine. Something sparkling for me," Daphne said, directing her words towards Binny.

"Same," Parkinson said indifferently. Binny bowed and disappeared.

"Please, sit." Malfoy gestured towards the available chairs. He handed a glass to Bulstrode, who accepted it with a nod. "My manor is your manor."

Malfoy was being very polite, and his magic was laced with nervousness. Harry wondered how long it had been since he'd had his peers in his home. Probably a long time, he presumed, since Lord Voldemort had been staying here on and off while in hiding for what —years? Harry imagined that didn't make his home welcoming to hosting.

Daphne glanced around the game room, seemed to find it approving, then looked at Harry. She smiled. "Harry, good to see you again," she said, going straight for him. She pulled him close, kissed his cheek, then stepped back to examine him. "You look well," she said. "Very well. Have you been vacationing?"

Harry glanced at Draco, unsure what the 'correct' answer was. He supposed that spending his days with Luna and Hagrid, planting things in a section of the Forbidden Forest that had been obliterated by his best friend, constituted a vacation for him.

But he somehow didn't think that was what Daphne Greengrass meant or expected when she asked. And besides, he was supposed to have been spending all that time with Draco, who was definitely not wasting his days at Hagrid's hut… no matter what he told his mother they were up to. "Yes," Harry said blankly.

"I took Harry to our vacation home on the Amafi Coast for a bit," Malfoy lied smoothly. "Said he needed some time away."

"Ah, well, that explains the tan," Daphne said. "Rest, relaxation, and sunshine suits you, Harry."

"Er, yeah," said Harry. "Thanks." And then, because the thought of

actually going to a fancy vacation home away from everything indeed sounded nice, he added, “It was so nice, in fact, that I can’t wait to go back for a bit. When did you say we could return, Draco? Was it next week, or the week after?”

Malfoy’s magic darkened, annoyed, but his smile was impressively deceptive. “Anytime you’d like,” he said. If he was irritated that Harry was trying to force a real vacation away from the manor out of him, he didn’t show it on his face at all.

“Excellent,” said Harry. He lifted his glass towards Draco and rook a sip.

Binny returned with two glasses full of what Harry assumed was champagne, which he floated towards Daphne and Parkinson. They each took their drinks and Binny once more vanished.

“I’m glad you’ve decided to do some traveling after all, Harry,” Daphne said. She smiled at him again before taking one of the seats that Malfoy offered her.

Parkinson made some noncommittal humming sound to that, giving Harry the briefest of looks before ignoring him. “Greg, Blaise, Draco… good to see you all.” She then frowned, her magic twisting in disappointment. “Where is Theo?”

“Working late at the Ministry,” answered Zabini.

“Oh?” Parkinson asked. Her expression and magic brightened with interest. “Working with his father on that anti-muggle project?”

“I expect so.”

Right, Harry thought darkly. That genocidal project that would somehow control the muggle population. Harry made a mental note to bring this up the next time he got Voldemort alone.

“Well. Good for him,” Malfoy said, though he sounded anything but pleased. “More to drink for us.”

Parkinson shrugged and sat beside Daphne. “I hope he’s not working too terribly hard.”

“I hope that he is,” Zabini countered. “Wouldn’t want to displease someone important, would he?”

Obviously, by someone important he meant the Dark Lord himself. Parkinson straightened her posture a little. “No, I suppose he wouldn’t,” she agreed.

“Better him than me,” Goyle muttered. “I hated potions. Makin’ ‘em was bad enough. I can’t imagine trying to invent them.”

“Neither can I,” Malfoy said. “You would’ve blown yourself up dozens of times if it wasn’t for my help.”

Rather than look annoyed by this, Goyle only smiled. “Yeah… We would’ve,” he agreed.

There was a somber moment of silence following that statement. Even Harry could deduce that by ‘we’ he’d meant him and Crabbe. Everyone’s magic dimmed, uncomfortable and sad.

Harry still didn’t know how to feel about it. On the one hand, he felt sorry for them, for having lost someone they cared about—or pretended to care about, at least. On the other hand, Crabbe had nearly killed them all with fiendfyre, so his sympathy could only go so far.

“I was never no good at potions, either,” said Bulstrode. She’d placed her hand on Goyle’s knee. “More of a charms girl, myself.”

“I was never good at that, or much of anything,” Goyle said. He looked genuinely ashamed and depressed and God, was Harry really feeling bad for Gregory Goyle?

“Not true,” Harry said, surprising himself when he spoke up. “You were a great Beater. And I don’t admit that happily.”

A few of the others laughed, and even Goyle smiled. “Not good enough to think about flying for the Canons,” he said.

Harry instantly brightened. “How does one go about doing that, anyway? Do they regularly hold tryouts, or—”

“For Merlin’s sake, not again,” Greengrass cut in. Her magic was frazzled and her face was exasperated. “No more Quidditch talk, or we’re leaving.”

Parkinson and Bulsttode looked a little miffed that Greengrass had spoken for them, but they didn’t disagree.

“Sorry, Daphne,” Harry said, casting her what he hoped was a sheepish and charming grin. “I guess I can’t help myself.”

“You don’t have anything to apologize for, Harry, you’re far too new. It’s this lot that’s the problem, bringing up Quidditch at every possible opportunity. I swear it’s all they ever want to talk about, even when we’re here. Even when there are so many other more interesting and important things to discuss!”

Daphne turned to face Bulstrode and Goyle. “So? Are congratulations yet in order? Do we have a date?”

They both flushed, their faces turning shades of red and pink. “Not officially,” Bulstrode answered. Her fluffy magic was cheery, yet somehow also anxious. “But I expect soon we will. Everything has been submitted, we’re just waiting for the approval from this new Ministry committee…”

Daphne clapped her hands together excitedly. “Oh, I can’t wait! I hope it gets approved quickly and you can have it in the winter; I think the decorations you could have would be splendid. Imagine if it snowed! How romantic.”

She sighed dramatically. Malfoy and Zabini both looked annoyed, like they would much prefer to go back to discussing Quidditch.

“You’re engaged,” Harry realized.

“Quite observant,” Zabini said dryly.

“Sorry, I just didn’t realize how many of you were already… I don’t know, *betrothed*.”

“It’s quite normal in pureblood families—I thought I said as much before, didn’t I, Harry?” said Daphne. “At the wedding of your two best friends, no less.”

“You did,” Harry admitted. “It’s still just… odd to me. I know you said you’re engaged, too… Are you *all* engaged?”

Daphne smiled and her magic curled in a way that told Harry she was hoping he would ask exactly that. She didn’t say anything though, she just sipped her champagne delicately and turned to face Parkinson.

For her part, Parkinson looked cross and her aura turned a deep, sickly hue. “I’m not,” she muttered. “But that’s only because my

parents made the very purposeful decision not to arrange my marriage… they wanted to allow me to decide my own fate."

"Parkinson's father broke a marriage contract in his youth," Daphne explained—looking at Harry as though he had asked.

"It wasn't a scandal," Parkinson snapped—as though someone had just argued that it was. "He fell in love with my mother. A perfectly acceptable match. A pureblood witch and a Fawley."

"Just not the one he was promised to."

Parkinson glowered, her magic becoming mutinous at how her supposed friend—was she a friend?—was bringing all this up. She sat up sharply and said, "It hardly mattered then and it hardly matters now. But it was a nuisance, needing to negotiate new terms, and so my parents agreed not to lock me into some marriage I may not be agreeable to."

She leaned back in her seat. "They want me to marry for love… assuming it's a good match to the right sort." She drank her champagne, and Harry did not miss the meaningful look she cast in Malfoy's direction, nor the way her magic gleamed.

Neither did Daphne."That's sweet of them, I suppose," she said, and though she smiled, her magiC twisted in annoyance.

It brightened a mere moment later, however, as she turned and addressed the room at large. "Speaking of the right sort—we're hosting our annual Summer Solstice ball on the twenty-first. I assume you've all received your formal invitations? I do hope you'll all attend. Especially you, Draco."

Draco blinked, looking a little surprised to be singled out. "Why especially me?" he asked slowly.

"Because Astoria is besotted with you, and she'll be quite disappointed if you don't."

Zabini and Goyle exchanged sly smirks as Malfoy, very uncharacteristically, blushed. "Er," he said, which also seemed unusual for him. Draco Malfoy, entirely at a loss for words and unable to come up with a way to flee the situation—or in this case, tactfully change the subject.

Parkinson scoffed, and her magic darkened. "Astoria?" she drawled.

“What is she, twelve?”

“She just turned sixteen a few days ago.”

Malfoy clearly regretted saying it the moment he did. Parkinson glared at him; Daphne looked only politely surprised while her magic danced about happily; Harry had an unanticipated moment of camaraderie with Zabini and Goyle as they all shared looks of barely concealed amusement at this great entertainment.

Only poor Bulstrode looked unsure of how to feel, but no one was paying her any mind. “What?” Malfoy said sharply. “I only know that because we got to talking at the wedding, and she told me, and I only remember because it’s the day after mine…”

He trailed off, ending his explanation by downing another glass of *Conbusit* and avoiding making eye contact with anyone by pouring himself another.

Another *crack* announced Binny, who had arrived in the game room yet again. “There is more guests, sir,” he said.

Malfoy looked relieved by this distraction for a moment, but then confused. “More guests? Who? I didn’t invite anyone else.”

He shot a pointed look at everyone in the room, settling on Daphne, who shook her head and seemed just as confused as he was. Harry had also thought that maybe she’d told Astoria to come, and that the night was about to get really interesting, but then Binny said, “It is being Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, sir. They arrived a few minutes ago in the foyer. I was telling them that you were all here’s, sir, but Binny was wanting to—”

The door swung open before he could finish. Ron appeared first, with Hermione following closely behind.

Harry was on his feet in a flash, nearly dropping his glass in shock. He just managed to set it on the table without spilling (though Binny’s discreet assistance might have been more responsible for that; Harry was sure the house-elf would prevent any sort of mess while he was present) before rushing forward. “Ron! Hermione! You’re back!”

They had indeed returned, Ron’s magic whirling with conflicting emotions as he took in the sight of Harry in the midst of a group of Slytherins. Hermione, however, ignored them in favor of focusing solely on Harry. She smiled at him. When Harry embraced her he

couldn't help but notice that, despite putting on a cheery face, she was not well. Her magic was duller than usual, less animated, like she was incredibly tired.

When he stepped back to look at her properly, he could see it on her face as well. She was tanner, that was true; her skin was a few shades darker from being in the sun, probably—but there were rings beneath her eyes as though she hadn't slept well the entire time they'd been gone.

"Hi, Harry," she said, and even her voice was softer than usual.

"Hi to you, too," Harry responded. He glanced back and forth between her and Ron; Ron was still taking in the game room filled with Mafoy and his best mates, looking disturbed.

Though he was beyond thrilled that his real friends had returned, Harry was worried as well. "Why are you back now? I thought you weren't coming back until Sunday…?"

Ron turned to face him, the petulant expression clearing from his face. Unlike Hermione, his skin was still quite pale, though his freckles seemed to have multiplied. "Ah. We decided to come back early. I, er. We—"

"It's my fault," Hermione cut in. "I haven't been feeling very well the past few days. And it seemed like a waste to be in France when all I wanted to do was stay in bed. I thought it would be better to come back so I could rest here and so Ron could at least spend the weekend with you."

"Assuming you haven't replaced us already," Ron said in a low voice, tilting his head towards Malfoy, Goyle, and the others. "Gotten some new friends, have you?"

He was clearly trying to sound sarcastic, but Harry could tell there was a sincere underlying concern, both in his voice and in the way his magic stirred.

"Ah, don't be jealous, Weasley," Malfoy said before taking a quick but long drink. Contratsingly, he spoke loudly and brightly, with a grin that was much too wide to be serious. Or entirely sober. "We're *all* friends here."

Ron looked affronted by the very idea. Harry laughed at his expression and wondered if he was also drunk.

“So, friends. Drinks?” Malfoy gestured towards Binny. “My house-elf will happily bring you whatever you like. Or we have plenty of—oh, I lied. There’s less than a quarter of this bottle left already. No idea how that happened.”

Harry knew exactly how that had happened—Malfoy had poured most of the second bottle of *Conbusit* in the last glass for himself—but decided not to comment. “Well. Binny will bring you whatever you like… Though probably just water for you, eh, Granger?”

The reaction was instant and telling. Everyone in the room snapped their focus to Hermione, their magic swirling with interest. Hermione looked shocked at the sudden attention… an expression that quickly turned to one of deep discomfort and, Harry could tell, soon-to-be anger.

“You’re pregnant?” Parkinson asked shrilly. Which was an accusation that skipped several steps of polite inquiry, Harry thought, but then again, this was Pansy Parkinson. She had never exactly cared about being polite or discreet to Hermione Granger.

Or Hermione Weasley, as it now was.

Hermione didn’t answer. She looked at Malfoy with a rageful look that Harry supposed would have made him wither, had he been able to sense her magic like Harry could. The velvet waves coiled around her in an ominous way.

“Oops,” Malfoy said, grinning slyly.

“You *are* pregnant!” Daphne exclaimed.

“Already?” said Bulstrode. “That was fast.”

“Oh please, Milicent,” Parkinson scoffed. “If they returned because she’s feeling sick, she’s obviously been pregnant for a while, and they’ve been keeping it a secret to avoid being shamed. Which explains the quick wedding.” She patted Bulstrode on the shoulder lightly. “Do try and keep up.”

Bulstrode swatted her hand away. “Excuse me for not knowing the details of getting pregnant out of wedlock.”

“And thank Salazar for that,” Goyle said, to which the others laughed.

Hermione looked anything but amused. Her magic was swelling with

anger by the second, and Harry was beginning to feel nervous.

Ron clearly sensed that it was time to leave, too. He and Harry exchanged a look that communicated everything they were both thinking: *Let's go.* "Ignore them, 'Mione," he mumbled. "Come on, we should—"

"Is that why you think we got married how and when we did?" Hermione hissed. Her glower was focused solely on Parkinson, who did manage to at least look surprised at Hermione's icy tone… though Harry thought she should be afraid.

Ron tried to gently guide Hermione towards the door, but she ignored him. "We were married here so quickly because it's what Lord Voldemort wanted," she said.

The effect of saying his name, the name which they had all feared to utter out loud for so long, continued to have a profound effect. Everyone's magic was shaken; Daphne gasped in shock.

And maybe Voldemort himself was still able to know when he was being spoken about, because it was in nearly the same moment that Harry, his blood running cold, felt him. Somewhere down the hall was the black and glimmering magic of the Dark Lord, and—Harry's blood ran colder still—another aura he knew well.

Bellatrix Lestrange. And then there was a third aura, though it paled next to the others… Lucius, Harry recognized. His magic was so close to his son's it had momentarily confused him.

Right now, all three of those auras were headed their way. Harry, panicked, tried to convey his alarm to Ron, but he was currently focused on his wife, whose rage was escalating.

"Our marriage was an event carefully coordinated and planned to bring together a fractured magical community," Hermione went on. "Or were you not paying attention to the toast that *he* made at our wedding? The one where Voldemort *himself* acted as the Binder?"

"Of course I was—"

"Pansy," Daphne interrupted warningly. It seemed she alone was aware of just what dangerous waters her friend had drifted into. While the others' magic had shivered when she first said Voldemort's name, they had already begun to revert back to their usual temperaments, even beginning to seem amused at the hostility breaking out between

the two witches.

But not Daphne's. Her usually soft magic was sharp with concern.

"You shouldn't—"

"I shouldn't *what*, Daphne?" Pansy snapped. It was almost impressive how quickly she could maintain the same haughtiness she'd always had in school. "I shouldn't find it amusing, the explanation of Granger's hastily prepared and lavish wedding here? I'll admit I was a little confused before—it didn't seem reasonable to go to all that trouble so quickly for a blood traitor and a mudblood."

Pansy realized just how reckless she was being too late. The word slipped out of her mouth so easily, with the nonchalance of someone who was used to saying it often when in private.

But she was not in private now. Daphne gasped nearly as loudly as she had when Hermione had said 'Voldemort', but aside from her, Harry barely noticed how the others reacted. He drew his wand in a flash of rage, and Ron moved to do the same instinctually, even though he did not have one.

But neither of them were as quick or as menacing as Hermione herself.

"Call me that again," Hermione hissed in a low voice that did not sound like Hermione at all. She had her wand pointed at Parkinson's chest. "I dare you."

Parkinson glanced around to see that Harry was also armed, ready to throw a hex, and at her fellow Slytherins, none of whom had reacted quickly enough to do the same, though Malfoy's hand was hovering over the pocket where he surely kept his. Parkinson's magic finally wilted in fear, but she somehow managed to keep her chin raised.

Binny let out a horrible squeal; Harry hadn't realized he was still there. He wondered if the elf was obligated to prevent fighting if he were to witness it. "Leave us, Binny," Harry commanded. Binny, looking terrified, did.

The air was fraught with tension. No one moved, for it felt like the moment someone did, curses would be cast.

Harry held his breath as he realized they were not exactly unsupervised any longer. Outside the door, *right* outside the door, were Bellatrix, Lucius, and Voldemort… and while Harry found it

slightly absurd that those three would be eavesdropping on them, Harry could think of no other reason for them to be standing there, waiting. He wondered how much they'd heard already. Perhaps they were curious to hear how this would play out; Voldemort's aura was glimmering in a way that said as much.

Harry wasn't. "Hermione, leave it, she's not—"

"I should cut out your tongue with dark magic for daring to call me that," Hermione seethed.

Parkinson's eyes narrowed, and while she tried to look disbelieving, fear was now clear in her aura. "Dark magic? You? Please," she said. "That's not exactly your style, is it, Miss Gryffindor?"

"You have no idea what my style is… because you're not important enough or smart enough to figure that out, are you?"

Hermione's aura was growing with rage; Harry had a very bad feeling about what she might do. Outside, Voldemort's was shimmering with much brighter interest, as was Bellatrix's. Lucius, like him, was obviously worried.

"You look at me and you still see the girl you bullied in school, who you cornered in the bathroom with your little gang here where you knew Harry and Ron couldn't help defend me," Hermione continued. Harry and Ron exchanged a glance—Hermione had never mentioned anything like that to them before. "You look at me and you see the obnoxious muggle-born who, despite her poor upbringing, still managed to outperform all of you in every subject. You look at me and see your enemy. You all do, even still."

Hermione's ferocious gaze swept over them all. None of them said anything.

"Allow me to reframe myself in the current regime in a way that will make things perfectly clear, hopefully for good. I am not a *mudblood*; I am a registered, free witch. I have recently been made the Dark Lord's personal assistant, and am, in fact, a Death Eater. I'm one of his most valued followers now… and you?"

Hermione spoke to only Parkinson now. She jutted her wand towards her, and though she did not cast anything, her magic was stirring around her. The various glasses and bottles on the shelves began to rattle and shake.

“Hermione, we—”

But she continued to ignore Harry and Ron. “You’re nothing but another vapid, vain, undeservedly arrogant girl from a rich family. I’ve risen in my station despite countless obstacles, but you? You have nowhere to go but *down.*”

Hermione’s magic lashed out, whips of velvety streaks that flickered around the room. Several glasses and a tall, crystalline vase from one of the top shelves fell and shattered on the ground. Shards scattered across the carpet; Malfoy swore loudly and Daphne shrieked.

Hermione didn’t seem bothered by her accidental magic at all. “I’m worth ten of you,” she finished scathingly. Parkinson only stared, frozen, clearly at a loss of what she should say or do.

A stretch of tense stillness followed her words. Hermione was breathing hard as she continued to glare at Parkinson, the threat of an intentional curse still very much present. Harry wanted to somehow extract himself, Hermione, and Ron from this situation, but he could not see how that would be possible.

“How… intriguing.”

Harry’s stomach sank at the inevitable interruption. The door had silently swung open and Voldemort had spoken, his tone conversational but his aura dancing in interest.

Bellatrix and Lucius were behind him, but everyone in the room reacted viscerally the moment the Dark Lord appeared. Draco, Parkinson, and the rest of the Slytherins went wide-eyed with shock before getting up and falling to their knees. Hermione, Ron and Harry lowered the wand arms, which Harry thought was almost as good as genuflecting in reverence.

Bellatrix did not agree with him. “Show some respect, fools,” she hissed. She had her own wand raised, her gunmetal limb gleaming.

“No,” Voldemort said, to Harry’s great surprise. His curious gaze was focused on Hermione. “I’d like to hear more from one of my most *valued followers* how important she is.”

Hermione’s face paled, and her magic, which had been flowing through the room before, quieted, suddenly looking very different than Bellatrix’s. “I-I…”

Voldemort smiled—a small and dangerous grin. “At a loss for words now, *Hermione?* How very unlike you.”

His gaze fell to the broken glass scattered across the floor. “I would say this was an impressive display of magic if it were intentional,” he murmured. He looked back at her. “Was it?”

Hermione swallowed hard. She knew better than to try and lie. “No,” she admitted

“Disappointing.”

“Why are you here?”

Voldemort slowly turned his gaze towards Harry. There was a flicker of a moment where Harry’s whole world halted—Voldemort’s blood red eyes tended to have that effect, especially as Harry couldn’t help but recall the last time he’d looked into them.

This is what you have with me, Harry… this is what we are.

Harry tried to keep his focus on the present. Voldemort’s magic was deep and mesmerizing and truly enigmatic. “An excellent question,” he said. Voldemort turned his attention towards Hermione and Ron. “Both Lucius and myself receive immediate notifications when anyone enters the property… We knew at once when two people came to the manor via the Floo. It was an unwelcome interruption in a relatively important meeting. I do not like being interrupted.”

Which didn’t explain why Bellatrix had needed to come, Harry thought sourly. Maybe she just couldn’t stand to be away from her dear master for too long.

Voldemort’s face was expressionless, but his magic was flickering in irritation. “Why have you returned early?”

Ron cleared his throat, clearly needing a moment to mentally prepare to answer him, but Hermione spoke first. “I wasn’t feeling well,” she said. “So we came back.”

Voldemort’s magic grew heavier with darkness. “You did not have permission to return early.”

“I wasn’t aware I needed permission for that,” Hermione said indignantly. Her own magic was shaking again. “I thought I was a free witch… my Lord.”

Her tone was far too close to sounding sarcastic. Voldemort's eyes flashed; everyone's aura was shaking with absolute terror. Those who were still on their knees kept their heads deeply bowed as though afraid to watch.

"You need permission for *everything,*" Voldemort said, advancing on Hermione. "You may be a free witch, but you are also, as you've so passionately declared, a *Death Eater."*

Hermione screamed. She buckled and fell, gripping her left arm. Ron caught her before she hit the floor.

Harry's blood boiled in an instant, but it was over before he or Ron could demand that he stop.

"You go nowhere without my express permission," Voldemort hissed. "You were to be in France until Sunday. Your return disrupted our meeting. You will find, Hermione, that such actions have consequences, however trite you may think they are."

"It was my idea!" Ron blurted out, as it was clear Voldemort was about to inflict another dose of pain. "I-I was the one who said we should—"

Voldemort, his eyes never leaving Hermione's face, flicked his wrist lazily at Ron. He instantly lost his voice.

"It is fortunate for you that you *are* valuable," Voldemort continued as though Ron had not spoken at all, "or those consequences would be infinitely worse. I am not opposed to using Unforgivables as punishments. Just ask your fellow Death Eaters."

Bellatrix laughed; Lucius's face became stony and his magic trembled worse than anyone else's. Harry recalled then just how well he knew that—he'd been tortured by the Dark Lord for so long under the *Cruciatus*…

"I-I'm s-s—"

"Silence," said Voldemort. "Apologies and groveling, as enticing as they may be, do nothing. You came here, unwelcome, distracting *me* as well as disrupting what appears to be an otherwise peaceful gathering here…"

He looked briefly at all the young, groveling Slytherins, but his focus soon went to the glass scattered all over the floor.

“You speak of your value, your rise; yet you allowed your anger to best you as though you were an enraged child…”

Hermione looked at him and, despite everything, seemed outraged. “She called me—”

“It doesn’t matter what anyone calls you who isn’t *me*,” Voldemort interrupted. “You are a Death Eater. You are supposed to be better. And while displays of magical power are often effective, they are foolish if you are unaware of what you are doing. Power is nothing without control.”

“I thought there was *only* power?”

Voldemort turned, slowly, to face Harry. Harry’s grip on his wand was so hard it was shaking. “I thought there was only power, and those who were too weak to seek it.”

He wondered if Voldemort was envisioning that memory, too. The first time they had ever come face to face, the Mirror of Erised between them, the Sorcerer’s Stone just beyond the Dark Lord’s reach.

“You said so yourself,” Harry added bitingly, as though he needed reminding.

“When I was speaking to a child,” Voldemort responded. “Are you all children still? Must I speak about broad and complex concepts like power, in all its forms, in such simplistic terms? As though the world truly is black and white? Or are you now adults who can handle more?”

He didn’t wait for Harry to answer, but turned to face Hermione again. “There *is* no good and evil, there *is* power and those too weak to seek it… but only those who learn to control their power are of any use to me.”

He lifted one hand, and as he did, many of the shards of glass floated into the air, Voldemort’s magic wrapping and dancing around them. They hovered for a moment before gliding towards each other in an odd way. Moments later, and each of the glasses that had fallen were pieced back together, whole once more. They then floated back to the shelves from whence they had come.

Everyone watched the display of careful, wordless and wandless magic in varying degrees of awe. Harry himself tried not to be impressed. *House-elves do that all the time,* he thought bitterly.

“So let us see if you can continue to be useful to me, Hermione,” Voldemort said. “The broken vase remains. Fix it yourself.”

Hermione stared, then gave a shaky nod. She shifted away from Ron and lifted her wand.

Bellatrix let out a high and cruel laugh. “I thought she was smart!” she jeered.

Hermione’s face fell and her magic dimmed in recognition.

“You fix it the same way you broke it,” Voldemort said coldly. “You have twenty-four hours to do so. You may not leave this room until you do. For any reason. Do you understand, Death Eater?”

Hermione’s eyes fell to the floor where the broken vase pieces were. “Yes,” she whispered. “M-my Lord.”

“Good.”

“And what if she doesn’t?” Harry asked the question without thinking.

Voldemort cast him a fleeting, dark look before staring down at Hermione again. “Do I need to embellish these commands with a threat, Hermione?”

“N-no.”

“I did not think so.”

Voldemort turned to leave. Bellatrix and Lucius went to follow him, but just as he had entered the hall, he paused. Voldemort’s magic glimmered brightly in a way that Harry did not like at all. He turned around.

“You.”

He gestured lazily at Ron. Ron coughed, then cleared his throat, obviously able to speak once more. He looked at Voldemort, half-expectant and half-afraid, his usually warm and fuzzy magic heavy with fear.

“You say it was your idea to return early. And yet, you are not hindered by any kind of illness, are you? You just happen to have an entire weekend void of any court-ordered Ministry work or plans at all. Well, fortunately for you, since our meeting was so rudely interrupted, we decided to postpone it… which means our evening has

collectively just opened up."

For the first time since arriving, the Dark Lord smiled. He aimed it at Bellatrix, whose magic immediately brightened exponentially. "Bellatrix, what say you to an evening of working with Ronald Weasley here? Lucius, one of your many empty ballrooms should suffice, no? Your son and these other young witches and wizards can even watch… it will be an excellent lesson for them to observe."

Lucius lowered his head. "Of course, my Lord," he said. "Whichever room you prefer."

Bellatrix grinned. Her smile was truly horrible; Harry was reminded at once of how she had looked when she'd tortured Neville. That expression was now aimed at Ron, who sat pale and terrified on the floor.

"I would be happy too, my Lord," she said, also inclining her head.

"Excellent. Lead us to your largest ballroom then, Lucius. The more space, the better."

Lucius nodded and left the room, Bellatrix at his heel, looking more excited than Harry had ever seen her.

Voldemort did not immediately follow. He flashed his crooked grin at Ron. "On your feet, then. We have work to do."

With another flick of his wrist, Ron was wrenched unexpectedly to his feet. "The rest of you are welcome to join us, though not necessary. Perhaps you would prefer to watch Hermione attempt to reconstruct this vase? Though I daresay that will be *far* less entertaining than what I have planned."

He then turned to leave. He did not give Harry so much as a parting glance.

Ron hesitated for a moment, but Harry prodded him, knowing that things would only be infinitely worse if the Dark Lord had to come back and retrieve him. "Let's go," Harry muttered.

"Ron, don't—"

"He'll be fine, Hermione," Harry said confidently, though he surely had no idea. "I'm going too, I'll make sure. And—and I'll come back as soon as I can. You just focus on that."

Hermione looked down hopelessly at the broken vase. She nodded, but her velvety magic was cold with despair. “Be careful,” she whispered.

Harry didn’t give Ron a chance to respond. He all but shoved him out the door, where Voldemort was already halfway down the hall, behind a stony Lucius and an over-eager Bellatrix.

Harry wasn’t sure if the gang of Slytherins was going to follow or not —probably, he presumed, as the Dark Lord himself had suggested it, but they hadn’t left yet. He imagined they were all stuck to the floor with shock and would need a moment to gather themselves. He just hoped they didn’t bother Hermione too much before deciding to leave and join them.

To see what, though…

“What are you going to have her do?” Harry asked, once he and Ron had caught up to Voldemort’s leisurely pace.

The Dark Lord’s magic was a brilliant sky, golden sparks glistening in a sea of black. Whatever it was he had planned, he was clearly looking forward to it a great deal. He gave Harry a mischievous grin.

“I’m going to have her make him less useless to me,” he said happily.

Unforgivable

“Dueling… is an art form.”

Voldemort spoke slowly, walking at a measured pace. He was in the center of a ballroom that was nearly as big as the one where Hermione and Ron’s reception was held. This one, however, did not lead outside into sparse woods covered in faerie lights. It was a circular, enclosed hall now that the door had been shut behind them. No windows, no other apparent exits. They were effectively trapped, together.

One glance towards Ron told Harry he very much realized this as well. His magic looked sickly—a pale tint of its usual fiery orange.

“It is a combination of all of your skills; a true culmination of everything that makes one a worthy witch or wizard.”

Harry’s eyes snapped back to Voldemort. His casual pacing and conversational tone reminded him of a professor, one who was excited to teach his class something new. He held his wand lightly with one hand, the ominous Deathstick swishing back and forth as he walked. His magic was lighter than normal and glimmering cheerfully. Harry, who had always known that Tom Riddle had applied to be the DADA professor several times, had never considered before this moment that he might have done so because he also genuinely enjoyed lecturing.

“Your abilities, of course—what spells you have mastered and can cast with ease, but so much more than that. Knowledge is paramount, for you must recognize the hexes and curses being thrown at you and know whether you can block them with magic or they must be avoided… creativity, for a duelist who only thinks to cast the same spells over and over will quickly find themselves thwarted… speed, naturally, and grace… cunning and cleverness, along with the ambition necessary to destroy your opponent at any cost… and, dare I say, the bravery to act at all.”

He flashed them all a wicked grin. Harry was certain that no one in the room—aside from Bellatrix, who was prowling around the perimeter of the hall and smirking sadistically—felt even remotely brave.

Lucius was stone-faced and rigid where he stood beside his son; Draco attempted to mimic him but did so poorly. The other Slytherins who

had filtered in not long after them did not look amused by Voldemort's words (Voldemort himself was clearly amused at the entire situation, judging by his giant grin) or happy to be there at all. Harry could guess by their expressions and magic that they were here only because no one turned down an invitation from the Dark Lord, even if he did infer that their presence was optional.

Despite the fact that they had all just been gathered in a game room, drinking fancy alcohol and discussing engagements and pregnancies and other adult topics, Harry couldn't help but think one thing:

They were all so young.

Each of his former schoolmates looked as fragile and innocent as first-years as they stared with wide eyes at the Dark Lord, listening to him speak. Harry was pretty sure it was the first time most of them had been in the same room as Voldemort. And while they did a decent job of standing tall and acting unaffected—Daphne was especially skilled at holding her chin up proudly—they still clearly were. Goyle kept glancing at the door like he might bolt for it at any moment, and Parkinson's magic was shaking terribly.

None of them looked as bad as Ron.

Harry wished he could say something encouraging to him, but not even he was bold and reckless enough to try and interrupt the Dark Lord when he was speaking in front of a group.

At least I know he won't do anything to seriously hurt him, Harry thought morosely. It was a small consolation and did little to quell his anxiety.

Because Voldemort hadn't said that he would be the one doing anything to Ron, had he?

"One must always be prepared for the worst when facing an opponent," Voldemort continued. "A vital truth that only becomes more difficult as one gets stronger, more experienced, and more powerful… underestimating your enemy is, perhaps, the worst mistake one can make."

He stopped pacing and gave Harry the briefest of looks, the eye contact so quick that Harry might have thought he imagined it if it weren't for his magic. In that very short moment, Voldemort's aura flashed with that familiar feeling: fondness.

Harry's face hasn't even begun to blush properly at the implication—Voldemort had certainly underestimated him, Harry, more than a few times, and he'd once hated him for that, hadn't he?—when the Dark Lord turned his attention back to the room at large. In particular, he smiled at Ron. "The fear you feel now at the prospect of facing someone who far outmatches you is your greatest asset. Fear makes you sharper, quicker, bolder. The adrenaline coursing through your veins leaves no room for frivolous and distracting thoughts. Cherish it."

Ron, who looked so pale that Harry feared he might pass out, hardly looked like he was about to 'cherish' anything about this. But to Harry's great surprise, he kept steady eye contact with the Dark Lord, and he nodded curtly. His magic even brightened a bit. Harry felt a strange rush of pride at his friend's bravery.

Voldemort also looked pleased. "…A demonstration, I think," he continued. He started pacing again. "For as much as I could speak on the importance of what qualities make a great duelist, I may as well be describing the beauty of a sunset to a blind man. Magic must be felt, experienced, and when it comes to dueling in particular, one must always be ready to act…"

Voldemort cast the first spell.

Some wordless magic shook the air, and everyone started. Parkinson screamed, several others turned or ducked or otherwise flinched. Harry had begun to reach for his wand out of instinct, but it didn't matter that he wasn't quick enough—the spell was not aimed at him nor at Ron.

Bellatrix moved as though she'd just been waiting for it.

Voldemort's spell missed her by inches as Bellatrix twisted away, letting out a sharp laugh as she did. She brandished her wand, returning fire at the Dark Lord who flicked her curse away with ease, and a rapid-fire duel began.

Spell after spell was cast, curses that Harry did not recognize and which he had no way of knowing because they were all wordless, silent. There was no time for muttering incantations in a duel of this caliber; every second was vital. Harry watched in mute fascination as the two moved around each other, graceful and swift as vipers.

And the *magic*.

Each enigmatic curse lit up the hall in a cascade of color; blue then red then emerald green. Their auras, however, were what really held Harry's attention. He had never seen Voldemort's magic glimmer so proudly, so wildly. So *alive*. It crackled around him like a night sky catching fire.

He was also *smiling* like Harry had never seen before. As he let loose a spell that required a very intricate, quick wrist movement, he was beaming, and his eyes were wide and bright as flames.

"Ha!"

Bellatrix let out another sharp laugh as she forced away whatever that spell was, something white and soft looking. "Typical!"

Harry wondered if anyone had ever called the Dark Lord typical before. Voldemort scowled, but then he was smiling again as Bellatrix shot another curse his way, a deep red spell that he deftly dodged. It hit the wall instead, leaving a nasty black stain on the wall.

Voldemort looked at the scarred wall, his brow arching when he turned to face Bellatrix again. "Really, Bella?" he said. "How *crude* ."

She was laughing when he cast the next hex, which she avoided and nimbly returned, which he then dodged in a similar manner, and the way they were dueling, Harry realized, it was almost like a dance, like this was something they had done many times together… like this was much more about practicing spellwork, countercurses, and being agile than it was about trying to actually win anything…

Because that's exactly what it is, Harry realized. This type of dueling was training. No one was recently tied to a headstone, about to be executed mercilessly here. This was a witch and a wizard who were trying to best each other, yes, but in a way that was beneficial to both of them, and it was clear, so very clear, that they had done this together many, many times… And it *was* like a dance, wasn't it, and the way they were both smiling, how they had such an intimate understanding of each other and their spell work, how they had inside jokes, even… The way their magic was roaring and pulsing with life…

…One does wonder who the lucky witch shall be—the one to possibly pull on those strings of power. If there even is one, that is. Bellatrix Lestrange might have been a solid bet—there is a rumor that she and the Dark Lord were once lovers, years ago …

Daphne's words rang in the back of Harry's mind. He had not put

much thought into them then, but now, as he watched them duel, smiling, laughing, nearly *flirting*…

It was such an obvious realization that Harry was shocked at how it made him feel. It was like a cannonball had just struck him in the chest, and for a moment, he forgot to breathe.

They *were* lovers.

They *were* flirting.

Harry thought he might be ill.

Bellatrix fired a bright blue spell, and the Dark Lord did something that caused everyone to startle with shock. He lowered his wand. The spell was headed straight for him.

He raised one hand, and the spell froze in mid-air.

It was such an impressive feat of magic that Harry managed to be distracted from his unwanted feelings of nausea. Voldemort grinned wickedly, then threw his arm out wide. The spell which he had caught went soaring back towards Bellatrix, who barely managed to dodge it in time.

She did not dodge the next spell.

The Dark Lord anticipated her movement, and as she avoided one curse, she was struck with another. A simple disarming spell. Her wand went fluttering from her gun-metal hand, and while it did not go soaring towards the Dark Lord, it did land several feet away from her.

She barely cast it a glance before glowering at her master. She was panting, exerting from their duel, her hair wild about her. After a few moments where she merely looked frustrated as she caught her breath, she turned to the Dark Lord and grinned. “Well done, my Lord,” she said. She bowed low, her magic deep and humble. Harry was certain that there was not another person on the planet that she would be so happy to lose to.

Voldemort bowed in response, his own magic quieting and glimmering happily. Unlike Bellatrix, he hardly had a hair out of place. “You keep me sharp as always, my Bella,” he said.

My Bella.

Harry no longer felt sick. He felt *venomous*. It swelled in him so strongly it was dizzying. His heartbeat roared in his ears.

Harry blinked as an odd sound shook him out of his bizarrely powerful emotions. People were clapping. Lucius was muttering something about their impressive and delightful spellwork, to which the young Slytherins all nodded vigorously in agreement.

Ron wasn't clapping. Ron looked horrible.

"So, Weasley," Bellatrix purred. She'd already retrieved her wand and was twirling it in one hand. "I hope you were paying attention. What did you learn?"

Ron's magic was erratic and frazzled. He glanced at Harry, who had nothing to offer him.

"Well?"

She fired off a stinging hex, which Ron barely dodged by jumping out of the way. The Slytherins laughed. "You just witnessed a dueling demonstration with the Dark Lord himself. What did you take away from it?"

Ron swallowed so hard Harry could hear it. "To, er, to not duel the Dark Lord," he answered.

Even Voldemort let out a short laugh at that. Bellatrix smiled. "Perhaps you're not a lost cause after all," she said. "Come on up, ickle Weasley. It's time to play with the big kids."

"I'm his second."

The words left Harry's mouth before he even knew he wanted to say them. Everyone stared at him, their magic in various states of surprise.

Harry cleared his throat and looked at Bellatrix. "You want to make Ron a better dueler? Fine. Then I'm his second." He stood a little taller as her eyes narrowed on him. "The niceties must be observed," he finished.

He did not look at Voldemort, but relished the way his magic reacted. Twisting in shock to hear his own words from so many years ago resurfaced here and now.

Bellatrix held his gaze for a moment, her magic darkening, but then she shrugged. “Fine, baby Potter. Then I suppose I also need a second…”

There was a thrilling moment where Harry thought she was about to name the Dark Lord, but she quickly turned and pointed her wand at someone else.

“My darling nephew,” she announced.

Draco’s magic paled drastically, but he covered up the displeasure on his face. “I somehow doubt you will be taken out by a Weasley, dear Aunt,” he sneered.

“Now, now, Draco. One never knows. Be prepared to jump in at any moment and avenge my tragic demise.” She looked expectantly at Ron and grinned. “Come on then, Weasley.”

“Er, well, much as I’d love to…” Ron raised his hands, holding up two open and empty palms. “I don’t have a wand. Sort of lost those privileges, in case you all forgot. Even though that was on his orders. So. Wow. Look at that.” He bowed hastily. “I’ve lost already.”

Judging by the way he backed away, Harry could tell that Ron really thought he was getting out of this.

Judging by the way Voldemort’s magic sparkled, Harry knew he was not.

“Ah… of course. Your wand,” Voldemort drawled contemplatively. Something about the way he spoke made Harry think he had not at all forgotten that Ron was wandless.“Unicorn hair core, willow… about fourteen inches long, correct?”

Ron blinked in surprise. “Y-yes,” he said. His magic glimmered in hope—did the Dark Lord have his wand *with* him, here and now?

Voldemort smiled and turned his attention elsewhere. “Tell me, Lucius, did you not recently procure a new wand for yourself with similar characteristics? Unicorn hair to be sure, but elm, if I am not mistaken…?”

Lucius’s already pale face seemed to lose even more blood. Still, despite his obvious horror as he surely realized what this meant at once, he nodded. “Yes, my Lord.”

“I imagine it will perform adequately for Ronald Weasley,” Voldemort said. “Allow him to borrow it, Lucius.”

Lucius did well, Harry thought, controlling his features. He forced a tight grin and nodded his head curtly towards his master. “Of course, my Lord.”

His magic told a very different story as he forced himself to approach Ron. When he offered his wand to him, Lucius’s aura was writhing with revulsion.

When Harry saw it—the handsome, long elm wand—he wondered why he had needed to ‘recently procure’ a new one, and then he remembered.

He, Harry, had destroyed his old one.

In a rushing moment he was reliving it, that whirlwind chase where he still had *his* old wand, his beautiful, holly wand, when he was racing away from the Dark Lord himself, six other false versions of Harry Potter also flying from Privet Drive… The day Harry had turned seventeen, and Voldemort had nearly had him, had cast a curse in mid-flight at him with Lucius’s wand in an attempt to prevent *Priori Incantatem*…

Harry’s wand had instead destroyed it in a fiery bout of magic he still did not truly understand. Something about it recognizing Voldemort as a threat, even with a different wand…

The sound of Lucius clearing his throat, loudly, snapped Harry back to the present.

If Lucius did not look thrilled about handing his wand over, Ron looked equally if not even more disturbed at the exchange. His magic was wilting around him as he slowly accepted the handle of Lucius’s elm wand.

Bellatrix laughed at the interaction. “Well, go on then,” she said. “Test it out. I like my opponents to at least know their wands work for them before I slaughter them.”

Ron grimaced at the word ‘slaughter’. He looked even sicklier as everyone stared at him, waiting for him to attempt casting a spell. Harry was unfortunately reminded of every time the Slytherins would start singing ‘Weasley is our King’.

And maybe Ron was thinking the same thing, because after a moment of looking like he might give up, he took on a suddenly determined stance. He glanced at Harry, who gave him the best, most reassuring look that he could in response, then looked upwards.

"*Expecto patronum!*"

A plume of bright silver shot forth. It swirled around, a vibrant curling of magic that contorted energetically, and while it was beautiful and strong, it did not become anything physical. Ron's face twisted in frustration before the silvery magic shimmered, then vanished.

He looked at Harry in distress. Strangely, it felt like they were suddenly the only two people in the room.

"What was that?" Harry asked—a teacher who was slightly disappointed in his former student from Dumbledore's Army.

"A shite patronus," Ron muttered. He glared down at the wand. "I think it's this wand. It feels… uppity, somehow."

Harry snorted. Ron's magic brightened as he smirked as well. Somewhere to their side Lucius made an indignant sound, but they ignored him.

"Excuses," Harry said. "What was your happy thought?"

Ron's expression went blank. "You know, I don't know," he answered. "I… I didn't really come up with one."

"Well, honestly. Do I even have to tell you why it didn't work?"

Ron smirked again, shaking his head. "Times are hard, Harry," he muttered—as though they were not in a room of Slytherins, Death Eaters, and Lord Voldemort himself, the architects of such 'hard times'. "Happy thoughts are not easy to come by."

"You're alive and safe, and so is your family?" Harry offered.

"That's setting the bar *really* low, don't you think?"

"You're about to have a baby!"

"That's a terrifying reality. It *literally* terrifies me."

"Hermione."

Harry could tell by the way his magic glowed that this was all he needed. Less often was more with Ron. He nodded, closed his eyes, and drew in a deep breath, his magic stirring. It seemed to move in a different way than it usually did… like it was undulating, wave-like, and darker…

Like Hermione's did.

He opened his eyes. "*Expecto patronum!"*

Harry was not at all surprised when this time, a fully formed Jack Russel terrier came rushing forward, bright silver and joyful. It bounded around the room, tail wagging and all.

"There it is!" Harry shouted happily. The dog turned towards the sound of his voice, jumping in excitement. "Excellent!"

Ron looked uncharacteristically emotional as he watched it—Harry worried he might cry—but then he gave Harry a bracing smile. "Thank Merlin," he said. "I was worried… I thought Azkaban might have fucked me up too much."

Harry felt like someone had dunked him in cold water. He had forgotten that Ron had spent time in Azkaban… It hadn't been very long, but he imagined it didn't take long to feel deeply affected when all the dementors thought they each might be the one lucky enough to suck out your soul.

"Oh *please.*"

The horrid sound of Bellatrix's voice once more brought Harry back to their current situation. Bellatrix scowled at Ron, her magic swirling darkly. "You were locked up in Azkaban for what—five minutes? Tck."

She slashed her wand across the air, where it made an impressive and ominous cracking sound, and magic sparkled from its tip. Ron jumped at the sound. His patronus vanished.

"You'll have to be far more impressive than that if you plan to last more than a second against me," she finished, her smile savage.

Harry looked at Voldemort, thinking for a moment to yell at him to call it off, but he knew it would be useless to try. The Dark Lord had been looking a little bored before, like he found the act of Gryffindors producing corporal patronuses with wands that weren't originally

theirs so very played out, but at Bellatrix's words he stood taller. His magic gleamed in interest again.

He was *excited*.

"Go," Voldemort said, nodding towards Ron. "You can clearly cast powerful spells with that wand… so let us see how well you do against my best."

Harry felt that venomous feeling curdling in his gut again as Bellatrix preened. She swept into an overly deep bow, never taking her eyes off of Ron as she lowered herself.

Ron cast Harry one last, deploring look—one that Harry took to mean something along the lines of, 'Take care of my wife and future child once I'm gone.'

"You'll be fine," Harry said, though he was sure he did not sound as convincing as he wanted to. "And if you aren't, I'm right behind you."

Ron smiled wanly. "Great," he choked out.

He faced Bellatrix. His magic was a strange combination of determined and very, very frightened. Bellatrix was grinning like a lunatic.

"This is the part where you bow," she purred, still bent over herself.

Ron drew in a deep breath. Everyone watched in anticipation from the far sides of the room; most of them took a few steps further against the wall. Daphne, Parkinson, and Bulstrode stood close together behind Goyle and Zabini as though they might shield them; Draco stood beside his father a few feet away.

Harry was closer than any of them. On the opposite side of the hall, Voldemort stood, eyes alight and magic gleaming in interest.

Holding the elm wand tightly in one hand, Ron slowly bowed.

There was a suspended moment where neither of them moved. As they faced each other, each bent at the waist, even their magic went stagnant. The air thrummed in anticipation. Harry held his breath as he silently prayed to whatever God may exist that Ron would escape this sick demonstration for the Dark Lord's amusement unscathed.

Ron fired first.

To Harry's shock, Ron struck, shouting *'Expelliarmous!'* and sending a flash of magic towards Bellatrix. The witch smirked and stepped out of the way, and Ron, advancing and impressing the hell out of Harry with his boldness, fired again.

It went on like that for what was probably only a minute or so, but which felt to Harry like a lifetime. Ron fired spell after spell, hexes ranging from simple disarming spells to blood-boiling curses, surely whatever he could think of, trying to hit the formidable witch with anything he could.

Bellatrix did not return fire. She merely dodged and twirled out of the way, sometimes in an unnessecarily flourishing manner, showing off the way with which she could avoid whatever Ron sent at her. She did not lift her wand once to deflect a spell or strike him. She didn't seem concerned at all; in fact, it looked like she was having a grand time.

She's playing with him, Harry realized. He knew it and he knew everyone else in the room knew it too. Voldemort's magic was slowly swelling with either impatience, anticipation, or both. His eyes were bright as they watched Bellatrix move, waiting for her to do something interesting already.

Ron was losing steam. Harry could tell by the way his magic was growing ever more frazzled; he probably knew he was wasting energy just trying to hit her, but what else could he do? His panic was clearly mounting, too, because surely this game of trying to land a spell would not last long.

It didn't.

"*Incarcerous!*"

Bellatrix avoided the spell which would have bound her, then finally cast a curse of her own.

Ron's eyes widened as the first bout of magic came flying towards him, and to Harry's relief, moved out of the way in time. "I think it's your turn to dance now, Weasley!" Bellatrix cackled. She sent another spell at him, which Ron once more dodged. "Let's see how you *move!*"

Ron yelped as another curse narrowly missed him, and suddenly the duel took a much darker turn. Bellatrix did not utter a single incantation when she cast at Ron, and it was all he could do to barely avoid every spell that was sent his way, one after another, their vibrant colors painting the hall in magic.

Ron was nowhere near as graceful as Bellatrix. He jumped this way and that, stumbling and awkward and flailing. The Slytherins were laughing, and Voldemort was smiling crookedly.

Harry, who had been feeling some degree of hope and pride in his friend for being able to successfully dodge wordless curses hurled by Bellatrix Lestrange *at all,* quickly became disheartened. Bellatrix's magic was growing brighter with every second, and Voldemort's, which was often so telling to Harry, was amused, not disappointed in her aim.

Because she wasn't missing. She was hitting exactly where she wanted, slightly to his left, slightly to his right. Bellatrix was purposefully missing Ron, sometimes by less than an inch it would seem, forcing him to rush this way or that. She was controlling everything, testing him out to get exactly what she wanted—to see how he moved.

She paused in her onslaught. Ron was panting, holding his wand up defensively, shaking but trying to be prepared. "Not the worst I've ever seen," Bellatrix said. "What you lack in agility and sheer talent you might make up for in boldness… it's not often someone strikes me first. *Such* a little Gryffindor!"

She put her arms out on either side of herself, leaving her chest wide open. "Cast a wordless spell, Weasley," she said. "And I'll give you a free shot."

Ron's eyes widened. He pointed the elm wand steadily at her heart.

Come on, Ron, Harry thought pleadingly. *You can do it! Just a simple hex! Anything!*

Ron's face was screwed up in concentration. The Slytherins were laughing again. Bellatrix grinned and waited.

" …*Stupe*—!"

"No!"

Bellatrix's face turned fierce, and her magic crackled. She sent a curse at Ron's feet; it was the same curse that had turned the wall black. Ron yelped as he jumped away from the blackened floor.

"I said *wordless!*" Bellatrix screamed, sending another spell at him. It singed the corner of Ron's robes.

“You must learn to *listen!*”

She fired again; Ron twisted away just in the nick of time.

Bellatrix's face was sadistic and cruel. It was clear that she would not be missing on purpose again.

Ron took a hasty step back. He raised his wand, retreating further, clearly shaken and unsure what to do. Bellatrix advanced on him, her magic writhing around her in an ominous fury.

“Where do you think you’re going, Ronnie-kins?” she asked. “The fun is just starting!”

“*St-stupefy!”*

Bellatrix flicked it away. Ron retreated further.

“Here, kitty, kitty!” Bellatrix screeched, and in two rapidly cast spells, one after another, Bellatrix finally met her mark.

Ron dodged the first flash of magic; he did not dodge the next.

Harry’s stomach dropped as a blue-green spell collided with his side. Ron looked shocked and horrified and then strangely confused as, for a moment, it seemed nothing was happening.

Then he screamed.

Ron let out a horrible wail as the curse took hold. He dropped the elm wand and wrapped his arms around his midsection, clearly in pain, though it was not yet apparent what the spell was doing.

Before Harry could demand that she cast the counter-curse, it happened.

At first, it looked like Ron’s whole body had melted, disappearing, leaving nothing but a pile of robes on the floor. For a horrific moment Harry thought that *was* what happened, but no, because his magic was still there, fluttering wildly but present, right along with his robes…

They were moving. Something shifted beneath Ron’s robes like it was trapped. Like *he* was trapped.

She made him tiny, Harry thought in despair. She made a miniature Ron, who was now struggling to free himself from the pile of his own clothing.

If only that had been true.

Everyone, including Harry, strained themselves to see better as whatever had become of Ron broke free.

The kitten let out a horrible, whimpering cry.

The Slytherins instantly roared with laughter as the tiny kitten, *Ron,* came stumbling out of the robes, moving awkwardly and fearfully on his four too-big paws. Harry's hand went to his mouth involuntarily. Ron the kitten yowled as it was likely dawning on him what had just occurred; at what, exactly, he now was.

"Awww, he's a cutie lil kitty cat, isn't he!" Bellatrix shouted. She bent over to get a better look at Ron, who stared up at her with his huge, blue, now feline-shaped eyes. "Figures that he'd be an orange cat," she muttered, to which the Slytherins laughed again.

Bellatrix raised one hand towards him, and Ron's whimper turned into a furious, spitting hiss. His back arched and his orange fur stood tall. Rather than intimidate anyone, unfortunately, this had the predictable effect of making everyone laugh much harder. Even Voldemort looked like he might chuckle. He was grinning at Bellatrix's display of transfiguration, looking pleased to finally be entertained.

"Doesn't Granger have a thing for cats?" Bellatrix asked, glancing at Slytherins and then at Harry. "She might like him better this way."

Harry glared, was about to yell at her and demand she turn him back, when Ron shocked all of them. The angry kitten lunged forward, claws barred, and attached itself first to Bellatrix's leg. She shrieked in shock and what Harry hoped was pain as Ron clawed and bit and, when she jumped to her feet, scaled her leg, ending up somewhere under her skirt as he continued to scratch at her for all he was worth.

Bellatrix screamed furiously, twisting around and reaching down her skirt to grab him. She struggled with it, and the display of Bellatrix spinning around, cursing and searching for Ron the kitten, who was somewhere in the folds of her skirt, clawing the hell out of her, made *everyone* laugh—even Harry was grinning behind his hand, which had flown up to cover his mouth again in shock.

"GET OFF, YOU LITTLE SHIT!"

Bellatrix finally seized him. She grabbed hold of Ron by the scruff of his tiny neck, then hurled him across the hall with great force. He

collided with the wall with a terrible, resounding smack; his kitten yowl upon impact became distorted as, once he hit the ground, the spell quickly wore off. Harry watched in mute horror at the way his body became human again. Ron was unconscious on the floor, naked, his arm at a strange angle, indicating that it was surely broken.

No one was laughing now.

“Ron!”

Harry ran, kneeling down at his friend’s side. He was breathing; Harry felt a wave of relief rush over him. It looked like his arm had gotten popped out of its socket. Harry gingerly touched him on the other shoulder.

“Ron,” he said, leaning over him to block as much of his exposed body as he could from the others. “Ron, wake up, Ron…”

Ron let out a low, pitiful moan, but he didn’t open his eyes. His magic was not stagnant, though; while it was certainly dimmer than usual, it was flickering with life, and seemed to brighten when Harry said his name. Harry exhaled a breath of relief. He was certain that Narcissa could set him right in no time.

“Here.”

Harry turned to see, to his surprise, Draco standing over him. He was holding Ron’s outer robe and offering it to him. His face was expressionless, as was his silvery magic. Harry snatched the robe out of his hand, draping it over Ron like a blanket.

Draco had turned and walked away again before Harry could mutter out a ‘thank you’, returning to his father’s side. Lucius once more had his wand in hand; he was examining the elm wood with a critical eye, as though to make sure Ron hadn’t ruined it.

“Aw, is poor Ronnie all banged up?”

Harry whipped about, getting to his feet and glowering as Bellatrix spoke in that horrid baby-voice. She had her lower lip stuck out, and though she was acting like getting clawed all over by a kitten hadn’t bothered her, Harry could tell it did. Her aura was twisting, fuming in anger that he’d managed to land anything on her at all. Harry was pleased to see that Ron had left a nasty cut on her normal arm, having ripped open the sleeve before she threw him.

She grinned when her eyes met Harry's. "I guess he's down for the count," she said. She started twirling her wand around playfully. "Does that mean that ickle baby Potter is—?"

It was like he became someone else.

As Harry listened to her speak, watching the way she casually swayed her hips, like this was all some silly game to her, like hurting Ron like that was such great fun, it felt as though a part of his brain simply shut off. The fiery, hot rage that had been building just moments before went suddenly quiet and cold.

She had hurt Ron.

She had tortured Neville.

She had killed Sirius.

Harry… hated her.

Bellatrix was still blabbering, laughing at him even, but all Harry could hear was a dull ringing in his ears. *She's not prepared,* Harry thought. *She's arrogant. She's weak.*

Bellatrix was still mid-sentence when Harry struck.

He hardly remembered raising his wand. All Harry could consciously register as he stared at Bellatrix was one determined, singular thought:

Pain.

Harry wanted her to feel as much pain as possible. He wanted her to suffer. He didn't need to utter the incantation; it was in his heart.

The flash of magic was accurate. Harry's curse hit her right in the chest. She *screamed*.

The *power*.

The last time Harry had used this curse on her, it had been a fleeting thing, a bout of magic cast by a heart-broken boy, fueled by his raw, burning emotion. She probably still saw him that way, like a weak child defined only by the tragedies that had befallen him.

How wrong she was. How *stupid.*

She screamed and screamed, her knees buckling and her magic

spasming in pain. *Yes,* Harry thought as she fell to the ground. *Yes,* he thought as he moved closer to her writhing form, his wand raised high, his eyes focused.

Yes, yes, yes.

More.

Was it because he was under the influence of the Elixir of Life? Was it because the wand he was now using was so accustomed to such spells, and it was the yew itself that wanted—no, *demanded*—that he do more, use more magic, more power, cause more suffering? Harry was unsure, he only knew that he could not deny it. His blood, his magic, his very soul was singing; he needed *more.*

Bellatrix's screams were becoming guttural, broken. Harry's grip on his wand tightened.

"SAY MERCY!" he roared, somehow keeping the spell engaged, never lifting it from her.

Bellatrix could not say anything while being tortured. Harry felt himself grinning.

"SAY IT!" he shouted. He thought he might start laughing. She was in such pain and he wanted to laugh.

"SAY MERCY!"

Her voice was giving out already. How disappointing.

It's not enough.

The high of such powerful magic wasn't building anymore, and something tugged at Harry. He needed something bigger, better, stronger; he needed more than this.

There was only one spell that would be enough.

Harry ended his onslaught. For a fraction of a moment he looked at her, really looked at her. Bellatrix was heaving and already her eyes had come back into focus, staring up at him in disbelief.

Nothing in his heart whispered that she should be saved. The yew was burning in Harry's hand as he raised it again.

More.

“Ava—”

His wand went flying from his fingertips.

Harry turned and blinked as though coming out of a trance. The Dark Lord had the Elder Wand raised in his direction. Harry stared at him, at his flurry of black magic. He had quite forgotten that Voldemort was there.

He’d forgotten everything that wasn’t torturing Bellatrix.

The ringing in his ears was back, as well as the loud pounding of his heartbeat, making it difficult to follow what was happening. Harry looked down at his empty hands. They had begun to shake.

Voldemort was speaking but Harry couldn’t make out the words. He couldn’t look away from his hands. They trembled and the ringing went on and on.

Lucius was scraping a battered Bellatrix off the floor; Harry could tell just by vaguely sensing their magic. He could also tell that Bellatrix was already coming back to herself, her aura returning to its usual waves of burgundy, all fierce rage and wounded pride. But she was gone before she could do anything.

They were all gone.

Harry felt the presence of their magic all around him, hurriedly leaving the room. Draco or someone must have gathered Ron, levitated him or something, because even he and his pile of clothing had vacated the hall. Only he and Voldemort remained, and Harry supposed that should have concerned him, but he didn’t feel anything.

His hands. Harry frowned and willed them to stop shaking. If he only he could get them to still, everything would be fine.

“Harry.”

Startled, Harry looked up. Voldemort was standing very close to him, and the sharpness in his voice told Harry he’d probably called to him several times by now. His magic was… odd. Strangely chilled, not glimmering but not writhing with anger, either. It had never been like this before. Harry wasn’t sure what to make of it; Voldemort’s stonelike face did not make deciphering it any easier.

His red eyes were fixed on Harry's face, like he was trying just as hard to figure out what he, Harry, was feeling.

That thought almost made Harry laugh. When his lips twitched, a smile threatening to break through, Voldemort's brows knitted together in concern.

Then Harry noticed that he was holding the yew wand as well as the Deathstick, and that smile vanished.

Voldemort followed his gaze. Unsurprisingly, he didn't hand the wand back to Harry. Instead, he looked him in the eye and said, "You will never cast an Unforgivable curse again."

Harry's lips parted. It took his buzzing brain a moment to process what Voldemort was saying—demanding. Casting such magic must have really affected him more than he realized, because before he knew it he *was* laughing, and laughing hard.

"Excuse me?" Harry said, indignant. "I will not? Never again? That command coming from the Dark Lord? Come now, *Voldemort*… I thought you *loved* the Unforgivables."

Harry felt more unhinged than he had when he hadn't seen daylight for weeks at a time, locked in the cell beneath the manor. He didn't care; it felt bizarrely… good.

It had felt *good*, that rush of power. *Really* good.

Except now, his hands wouldn't stop shaking.

He glared down at his traitorous fingers, focusing again on making them stop. And the ringing in his ears, that was getting annoyingly loud.

"Harry."

Voldemort's voice was softer, like he was trying to be some calming presence. The thought made Harry mad.

"Do you understand why, exactly, the Cruciatus curse and the killing curse are Unforgivable?"

"I can think of a few good reasons why," Harry muttered, still glaring at his hands.

"There are a great many curses that can cause pain and kill, and

which can kill in much slower, more horrible ways," Voldemort said. "These curses, though… the ones labeled Unforgivable. They are named as such not only for what they do, but because of what they require. To cast such dark magic… it takes a toll. A price must be paid every time. They… change you."

His hands. Harry started wringing his fingers together; they felt so cold and the *shaking!* It was maddening.

"They darken your soul."

Harry looked up at that, aghast. Voldemort's demand, and his act of seeming concerned rather than furious with him, suddenly and glaringly made too much sense.

"Oh," Harry said. "Oh, I see. I see. I understand perfectly. We'll want to make sure that the children attending Hogwarts keep learning how to cast these curses in school, of course, as part of a robust curriculum, but *me*—right, I'd better stop while I'm ahead, because you wouldn't like it, would you, if *my* shiny, bright, whole soul suddenly looked a bit too much like yours; no, that would be no good at all, would it, because allowing you a few moments where you get to feel like you're *not* a monster who's been ripped apart by dark magic is about all I'm good for, isn't—"

A wave of nausea crashed into him.

Harry felt suddenly so sick that he was shocked when he didn't vomit; instead he retched and clutched at his sides. It hurt to breathe.

It was gone almost as quickly as it had come. Voldemort steadied him, but Harry shoved him away, hard, surprising both of them with his ability to do so.

"McGonagall," he spat out. Voldemort stared at him, understandably confused, but it only made Harry more spiteful. "You want me never to cast an Unforgivable again? Fine. I have demands on my own in return."

Harry clenched and unclenched his fists. Still shaking. "I want McGonagall out of Azkaban," he said. "I want her out tonight."

Voldemort's magic swirled in a mixture of being annoyed and conflicted, but then he simply said, "Fine."

"And I want a list of everyone who's currently imprisoned, one that

includes all those who were sent there during the war and what their supposed crimes were," Harry went on. "And I want… I want…"

His voice threatened to fail him, but he persevered. "I want a funeral," he chocked out. "I want Neville Longbottom to have a funeral. He… his grandmother… He's not missing. He's dead. She… she should… He deserves to have a funeral."

The Dark Lord's face was like carved stone. Harry didn't know how he would fabricate a proper funeral for Neville Longbottom after he'd been the one to vanish his body, but Harry didn't care much about that.

Neville didn't deserve to just *vanish*.

"…Fine," Voldemort said at length. "I will see to Minerva McGonagall… and a funeral can be arranged, in time."

He moved forward slowly, like he was afraid that if he did so too suddenly Harry might flee like a frightened deer. He lifted one hand and carefully, very carefully, touched Harry's cheek.

He stared into Harry's eyes, but Harry couldn't take it for long. He didn't know what Voldemort was thinking after watching Harry do what he had done—*what had he done*—and he didn't feel like standing around, feeling his magic and trying to figure it out.

"I'd like my wand back," Harry said, holding out his hand.

"You can have it back when you stop shaking."

Harry looked down. It wasn't just his hands; they were the worst and most obvious, but the truth was that his whole body was shaken. More than his body.

Harry tried to take a calming breath, but it did little to help. If anything, it made it worse. *Why* couldn't he stop?

"Dark magic," Voldemort murmured, "takes a toll… you should never have to pay such a price."

"Because I'd be *ruined* for you?" Harry scoffed.

"Because it is not who you are." Voldemort's magic turned soft, the gold glinting lightly. "This… this is not who you are."

Harry felt sick again. He stepped away from the Dark Lord's touch.

“You don’t actually know *who* I am,” he snarled. Harry moved towards the door, furious and disoriented yet hyper-focused all at once—but holding tight to the fury. “If you did, you would have known to keep Bellatrix Lestrange the *fuck* away from me.”

Harry turned and marched out of the room, slamming the door with as much force as he could muster behind him. He was surprised that Voldemort let him go, but Harry was in no state to dwell on that particular mystery. He only had the mental capacity to find the nearest exit from the manor, where he was fortunate enough to not be yelled at by a portrait or encounter a Malfoy or house-elf or anyone else, and instead find some privacy in the gardens, where he was finally, violently ill.

Together Again

It was night, but it was not dark.

The gardens of Malfoy Manor had lights throughout them, magical pinpricks that illuminated the pristine grounds at all times. Harry wandered those grounds now, marching furiously, his hands balled into fists and shoved into his pockets to keep them from shaking. He was not yet ready to return to the manor and face… anyone, really.

Fucking Voldemort.

Harry had to fight the urge to rip apart a nearby rosebush out of sheer emotion. What emotion, precisely, he wasn't sure. Was he furious? Horrified? Offended? Something else, which was what made him feel so sickly?

Despite having already thrown up, Harry still felt nauseous. It seemed unfair, really. What good was the Elixir of Life if it couldn't handle *this?*

But Harry knew he wasn't physically ill. No, this feeling of doom and gloom went beyond that.

Unforgivables…

They darken your soul.

Harry already knew that the elixir could do nothing when it came to repairing souls, or fixing Voldemort's shredded one would have been easy. It wasn't. Voldemort was a broken, terrible man and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, that Harry—or anyone, or anything—could do to fix him.

He turned a corner, going deeper into the gardens. In one direction was the gazebo, having been put back after the wedding, covered in flowers and looking picturesque. On his other side was a path that led further out, into the sparse woods where Harry had allowed Ginny to lead him, and he had been a fool to do that, to think he could have any kind of romantic interaction that bordered on normal or healthy and…

And that *fucking hypocrite!*

Harry's blood boiled as he realized the truth of that. When he, Harry,

nearly had something with someone else, Voldemort had lost his goddamn mind. He'd made it more than clear, then, that Harry was not allowed to so much as *look* at another person flirtatiously, for fear that the Dark Lord might freak the fuck out and hurt someone—probably Harry, probably sexually.

But *then* he had the audacity to bring out Bellatrix Lestrange, the witch who killed Harry's Godfather, and parade her around, dancing and laughing and it was so very fucking obvious that they once were something and *were they still?*

Harry swallowed hard, hating that he felt like he might be sick again.

It bothered him. It shouldn't bother him but it did, and was he… jealous?

No, Harry told himself firmly. *No, absolutely not.*

He wasn't jealous, he was just mad. Mad about the hypocrisy of it all, at just how shitty it was that he would do that in the first place.

I don't care at all if he was or… or is fucking other people. I don't. I don't.

But… Bellatrix Lestrange?

He was *not* jealous, no; but because it was *her* of all people, that was what made it sting so fucking badly, what made him feel sick. Because if she and Voldemort had… been intimate, and Voldemort had once—Harry hoped in the past, long ago—really been with her… then in some strange law dealing with degrees of separation, it felt a bit like Harry, too, had… been with her.

Oh, no.

Harry had to stop walking, for a wave of nausea so great struck him that he was certain he was about to vomit again. Thankfully, he held it together. He straightened his posture and carried on, choosing to go towards the gazebo.

Voldemort was a fucking hypocrite and a monster and so was Bellatrix and *that* was why Harry felt the way he did.

…That, and he had nearly killed her.

A cold sensation crept slowly up his spine. Harry sat one one of the benches beneath the gazebo, letting the reality of what he'd nearly

done settle in his soul.

What he'd wanted to do.

Harry's hands, which had not yet stopped trembling, shook harder as he pulled them from his pockets. He stared at them, knowing they would not stop anytime soon.

He had *wanted* to kill her.

That was the most devastating realization of all. Hadn't he recently thought that he would never aim to kill? During his trial, he'd had the thought that his inability to cast a killing curse was what made him different from his father…

He had been wrong.

Harry ran his shaking hands through his hair. He bent over so his head was between his knees and breathed deeply.

What was he becoming?

Harry drew in another deep breath, held it for a few seconds, then exhaled slowly. He did this over and over again, focusing only on his breath, only on his slowing heartbeat. His hands trembled less as the minutes passed.

His scar prickled lightly, then stopped. Harry scowled. Voldemort *checking in*, no doubt, making sure his human horcrux was not doing something stupid, then swiftly throwing up his barriers once more.

Leave me alone, Harry thought viciously, but he had no idea if Voldemort could hear him.

Occlumency. Harry really, really needed to practice that, because it was not only unfair that Voldemort was able to use their connection and his mental magic skills to reach out to Harry whenever he wanted but that the same was not true in reverse, it was insanely dangerous. If the Dark Lord happened to do that at the wrong time…

Well, Harry knew someone who would be willing to help him with that. He felt a different kind of sickness at the thought of talking to a dead Snape again. Maybe, Harry mused, if he were able to really get all three Deathly Hallows, he could do something about that as the supposed Master of Death…

Harry stood so quickly that the blood rushed to his head, making him dizzy. Another damning realization stormed his mind.

He had been about to kill Bellatrix Lestrange and in order to stop him Voldemort had *disarmed* him—

The Elder Wand. The Deathstick. In his momentary lapse in sanity, had he…?

"FUCK!"

The bench Harry had been sitting on splintered beneath him. Which was a real shame, because he didn't have a wand to fix it with, because Voldemort was keeping it until his hands stopped shaking and *oh God had he lost the allegiance of the Elder Wand?*

Had he… had he made Voldemort the rightful master of it at last?

"FUCK!"

The bench that had merely splintered before broke fully in half. Harry all but ran away from it, knowing that having such strong emotions was unwise. He hoped that the Dark Lord really had thrown up Occlumency walls powerful enough that he was not aware of his feelings right now. Regardless, Harry tried to quickly get them under control.

Maybe not, he rationalized to himself as he marched along the path in the rose garden. *Maybe, if the Elder Wand only recognizes power… maybe it knows that I was only disarmed because I was about to cast a very powerful spell…*

But that sounded highly unlikely, even to Harry in his desperate state.

There was one way to know for certain, he figured, and that was to get the yew wand back. If *that* wand no longer felt warm and welcoming in his hands, if he had lost *its* allegiance… then he had likely lost the allegiance of the Deathstick as well. Harry stopped to look down at his hands again. They were still shaking like he had a tremor. *Guess that won't happen any time soon*.

He drew in another deep breath, forcing himself to calm down. Wands were… confusing, he thought. But he knew someone he could ask more about that obscure branch of magic, too.

Feeling not at all better but at least less panicked now that he had a

plan of action in mind, Harry kept walking, heading back to the manor. There were more immediate things he needed to focus on. Ron had been hurt; he needed to make sure he was okay, and—

Hermione.

She was still in that game room, likely despairing as she tried to put a vase back together with raw magic alone. If the Slytherins weren't gauding her, at least…

Ron or Hermione? Who should he go to first?

Harry bit his lower lip harshly as entered the manor, unsure if he should be relieved again or not that there was no one in sight as he walked along the halls.

Ron first, he decided. Hermione would be stuck in that room all night, and the very first thing she would do when she saw Harry, alone, with shaking hands and worry written all over his face, would be asking what happened. He needed to at least be able to reassure her that Ron was all right.

The problem, of course, was that Harry wasn't sure where he was.

"Binny," Harry called. The elf instantly appeared with a *pop*, bowing. "Can you take me to wherever Ron is? Do you know?"

Judging by the way Binny's ears fell, Harry could guess that yes, he did know, and had probably assumed something frightening involving the Dark Lord had caused Ron to become so injured. "Yes, master Potter, follows me, master Potter," he said.

Harry followed the elf down several halls and corridors, ignoring the portraits as they moved in their frames, watching him warily, until they entered the west wing. Harry could sense the familiar aura of Narcissa, alongside the slightly duller but otherwise undeniable aura of Ron, and then, to his surprise, that of Draco's. There were no other auras, however, which Harry could only assume meant that the rest of the young Slytherins had gone home. He couldn't exactly blame them —to say what he'd done had been a buzzkill would be putting it extremely mildly.

Binny took him up to the closed door of the room they were in, but when Harry heard them talking in hushed voices, he waved Binny away. The elf looked at him, confused. "Leave me. Quietly," Harry commanded.

He felt a bit bad about it, truth be told, but Harry knew that the only way to get Binny to go so that he could eavesdrop on his other, much more rightful masters was to command that he leave. By giving him no choice, he was also assuring that the house-elf could not be complicit in Harry's… misconduct, he supposed.

Binny gave him a look that Harry could only describe as judgmental before he bowed once more, and disappeared without a sound.

Harry eagerly pressed his ear to the door and listened.

"…turned him into a cat?"

Narcissa sighed, like she did not find the news that her sister had turned Ron into an animal all that surprising. "And exactly how long was he transfigured for?"

"Couldn't have been more than a few minutes," Draco muttered. "And he was a kitten, not a cat."

Narcissa's magic gleamed in a way that told Harry she thought that detail hardly mattered. "It's the length of time that one is transfigured that matters most," she said. "People who spend longer than an hour transfigured take much more time to regain their mental capacities. He's lucky that it didn't last long."

"Yeah, well, I'm sure it felt like a very long time to him," Draco snapped, surprising Harry with how defensive he sounded. His sheen of magic bristled.

Harry recalled why a moment later, as Narcissa seemingly did as well. *Ferret, right.* "I'm sure you're right, love," she said soothingly. "Any amount of time transfigured can be traumatizing… especially when you're physically abused during it. So only a few minutes, okay… and then what happened to cause the concussion?"

"Er… he was slammed against a wall really hard," Draco replied. Harry frowned, feeling it was unfair that he left out the bit about Ron successfully using Bellatrix as a scratching post first.

"I see… well, he's lucky that you fixed him up."

Harry was shocked to hear *that.* Draco has been the one to treat Ron, not his mother…?

"Yes, well, I've been taught by the best," Draco said, and his mother's

magic warmed considerably. “And I suppose it wouldn’t have been good to let Weasley die after… after all that happened.”

He let his words dangle there, implying that Ron being chucked against a wall as a kitten was not all that had occurred.

“Draco… what is it?” Narcissa asked. “What else happened in there?”

Dracos aura dimmed, becoming cooler with anxiety. “After Weasley was… incapacitated, it was… it was Potter, mum.”

“Harry? What did she do to Harry? Is he all right?”

“Yes, yes—I mean, shit, I don’t actually know—no, that—aunt Bella didn’t do anything to him,” Draco said. “It wasn’t that, it was… it was what Potter did to *her*.”

Her magic went stagnant, but Narcissa said nothing.

“Potter… he lost it, mum. He cast the torturing curse at her and he didn’t even need to say the word *crucio* to do it. Granted, I think the only reason he hit her at all was because she wasn’t expecting that, but—hell, none of us were.”

Silence. It went on for a long, terrible moment. Harry had a hard time listening over the sound of his own pulse thrumming in his ears.

“I… I see,” Narcissa said at length. “And how long did he hold her under the curse?”

“Not long, but it looked… it must have been really strong, because she stopped being able to scream pretty quickly, and he—Potter was yelling at her somehow, for some reason, demanding that she say ‘mercy’, but of course she couldn’t, she couldn’t even scream, and—”

Draco’s constitution rapidly declined as he recounted what happened, his voice quivering midway through and his magic becoming light with something awful, something Harry hadn’t yet felt before.

“Shh, shh, it’s all right,” Narcissa said, and although her magic had also begun to somewhat resemble her son’s, her voice remained calm. “It’s okay. I know. Seeing that curse is never easy, and it’s especially hard to witness after you’ve seen it used on someone you love.”

Then he remembered, again.

Lucius. If this was how badly seeing him torturing Bellatrix had

affected Draco, Harry could only imagine how shaken Lucius was.

“Where is your father?” Narcissa asked.

“I don’t know,” Draco answered. “He left the second we could, just rushed down the hall and I tried to follow him but he turned a corner and—and he was just gone already.”

“That’s not your fault, Draco. You know how he is. When he wants to be alone, he is.”

Draco made a sniffing sound that managed to make Harry’s heart hurt.

“What… what if he does something stupid?” Draco said, his voice wavering. “He just—he’s good, acting like it didn’t change him, but it did, and I—I don’t—”

“Shhh… I know. I know, Draco. Don’t worry.”

Narcissa’s magic became steely, determined. “I will find him,” she promised. “Your father is good, but he’s not as good as he thinks he is. I’ll track him down and I’ll bring him home, okay?”

A pause, and Harry imagined something sweet happening, like Narcissa kissing her son on the forehead, or hugging him, maybe.

“I will be back soon.”

Harry barely jumped out of the way in time. The door swung open, but Harry managed to skirt around a corner before he was seen. He quickly pulled his cloak out the second he was out of sight and draped it over himself.

“Wait, mum,” Draco called. Harry peeked around the corner to see Narcissa pause, looking back towards the room she’d just left.

“Yes?”

“I didn’t… I haven’t…”

Harry held his breath. Was he going to finish telling the story? Was Draco going to let his mother know that he, Harry, had not only tortured her sister… but had very nearly killed her?

Harry could sense the hesitation in his magic, which flickered about in uncertainty.

“What, Draco?” Narcissa asked.

“I… what am I supposed to do with him?”

Harry let out a quiet breath of relief. He didn’t love the idea of Narcissa knowing that, and for some reason, Draco didn’t, either. “He should be fine. You did an excellent job fixing his concussion. You could wake him up now if you want, but he’ll feel better if you let him rest. I imagine he’ll sleep through the night. Binny can keep an eye on him. Binny!”

The elf reappeared. “Stay with Mr. Weasley here, unless you’re needed elsewhere, and tend to him when he wakes up,” she said.

“Yes, Mistress,” Binny said dutifully. He bowed before stepping into the room with Draco and Ron.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can, Draco.”

“Should I come with you?”

Draco came into Harry’s line of sight, stepping out into the hall with his mother. Harry pressed himself against the wall, just in case.

“No,” Narcissa said. “You should stay here. I appreciate the offer, dear, but when it comes to tracking down your father when he’s in the wind, well…”

She placed a hand on Draco’s cheek and smiled fondly.

“You’d only slow me down.”

And with those parting words, Narcissa turned and walked away, heading towards the foyer. Draco watched her go with a mixture of annoyance and admiration in his magic, but his face was set in a scowl.

“Stay here… *tck,*” he muttered under his breath. Then he also left, going in the opposite direction, disappearing from Harry’s sight when he turned a corner.

Harry waited a few seconds, then crept to the entryway of Ron’s room. He could see Ron inside, looking peaceful where he laid in the middle of a large bed, wearing the cloak Draco had given him to cover him earlier. His magic was soft but healthy, swaying gently as he rested. Binny was at his side, watching attentively.

Harry considered staying as well; he even grabbed the hem of his cloak and was about to pull it off, but then changed his mind. Ron was fine, and he was being cared for by much more capable hands than his. Hermione needed him now, and Harry knew that if Ron were able to, he would tell him to bugger off and go help her.

Harry nodded as though Ron had just said exactly that. He left the cloak on, moving quickly to the other side of the manor. It was nice to not feel the stares of the portraits on him for once.

He wondered what Voldemort was doing.

Dealing with Bellatrix, probably, Harry thought. And while the image of the two of them together left a sour taste in his mouth, it also sent Harry's mind reeling. Was the Dark Lord worried over her? Angry with her? Disappointed, surprised, understanding? The more Harry speculated about it, the less sure he was. He could somehow imagine any one of those scenarios being true.

I hope he's furious with her for allowing herself to be cursed like that, Harry settled for. *If she hadn't underestimated me so greatly, if she had just* moved, *then none of this would have happened.*

Harry continued this train of thought, and by the time he was nearing the game room, he had convinced himself that all things wrong in the world were the fault of Bellatrix Lestrange and no one else. It was therefore a little disarming when he sensed Hermione's magic, alone, writhing in worry behind a closed door… so very much like Bellatrix's.

Harry hated that this was the case. How could two people who were so unalike have magical auras that were so… similar?

Not that he blamed Hermione for that. Harry removed his invisibility cloak, then stepped into the game room.

Hermione looked deplorable.

Everything about her said that she'd already given up. She was sitting on the ground, her knees splayed out on either side of her as though she had started out kneeling but then couldn't do even that any more. The glass shards remained exactly where they had been when Harry had last seen them—sharp fragments scattered before her.

Hermione looked up when Harry entered, her magic gaining a bit more color. "Harry!" she gasped. "What happened, where is everyone,

where's Ron—?"

She started to stand, but Harry motioned for her to stay where she was. "No, don't get up, I'll come down to you," he said as he closed the door behind him.

Her brows rose in surprise when he sat across from her on the floor, the broken glass littered between them. Then they narrowed in annoyance. "What—I shouldn't get up because I'm pregnant?"

"Er. Well… yeah?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Where's Ron?" she asked, her face and aura sharpening with worry again. "What happened?"

"Nothing good," Harry said. He shoved his hands in his pockets, for they still trembled. "He's fine," he added quickly, as Hermione began to look panicked. "He's fine, he… He had to duel Bellatrix. For Voldemort's entertainment and obviously as a punishment."

Hermione nodded gravely. "I figured that something along those lines would happen… I'm hoping he was given a wand to use, at least?"

"Yeah, Lucius's," Harry said, smirking a little.

"*Really?"*

"Yeah. I think the Dark Lord intended to do that—seems pretty keen to humiliate Lucius whenever he gets the opportunity."

"Sounds about right," Hermione said. "But Ron's okay? She didn't torture him?"

Harry did his best to hide his trepidation and forced himself to smile. "No—he did really well, actually."

"He did?"

"Yep," Harry said, nodding, because really, what was the harm in embellishing the truth a little? "Did an excellent job dodging her curses, even fired back. He really held his own."

"Oh, good, that's amazing," Hermione said, her magic warming in relief. "Where is he, then?"

"He's, ah, recovering in the west wing from a concussion."

“You just said that he did really well! That he’s fine!”

“He did! And he is! But—you know, this is Bellatrix Lestrange we’re talking about here, and—and all things considered he did do great. And he’s completely fine, I saw him myself just a minute ago. He’s sleeping like a baby and Binny is watching over him.”

Hermione deflated again, looking somewhat mollified. “Thank Merlin Narcissa is such an adept healer,” she murmured.

“Oddly enough… it was Draco who healed him, not Narcissa.”

“Draco?” Hermione’s eyes went wide. “Draco Malfoy healed *Ron?*”

“Yeah, I know, shocking, right? But Narcissa wasn’t there when—when it happened…”

“When *what* happened, Harry?”

Harry swallowed hard as Hermione glared at him, waiting. “Er… so, okay, they’re dueling, right? And Ron *is* doing great, dodging this way and that, but finally Bellatrix gets one over on him, and she transfigured him into… into a cat.”

Hermione’s hand flew to her mouth. “No.”

“Yes. But. But! Ron rushed her, yowling and all, and managed to scratch the hell out of her before she grabbed ahold of him and—and proceeded to, you know. Chuck him against a wall.”

Hermione dropped her hand, gaping. “That absolute bitch,” she said softly.

Harry was sure he’d never loved Hermione more. “Yeah… well, he turned back into a human after that, and—and the duel was clearly over.”

Hermione looked furious… but also skeptical. “And then Draco waltzed over and healed him, right then and there, in front of everyone?” she asked, clearly disbelieving. “And you *let* him?”

Harry drew in a long, deep breath as he considered her. There was no point in lying to Hermione, that was true—she tended to figure everything out on her own, anyway.

But did that mean he should tell her the whole truth?

Harry held her scrutinizing gaze for a moment longer, feeling the way her magic swirled back and forth, waiting… then exhaled, groaning as he did.

"No, that's not how it happened," he admitted. "I don't actually know how that bit went down, because as soon as I saw that Ron was okay, I sort of… stepped in. To the duel."

Hermione stared. "No you did not," she said, shaking her head—but Harry could tell that she had no problem believing that he did.

"I was his second," Harry murmured.

"What happened then?" she prodded. "I see *you* don't have a concussion… but, Harry…"

She reached out over the glass and grabbed Harry by the elbow. He begrudgingly allowed her to pull his arm forward, out of the confines of his pocket, where she could see his shaky hand.

She looked at it for a moment, then looked back at his face. "What happened?" she asked again, her voice much softer now. Her magic softened too, making it much less sinister.

"I cursed her," Harry said bluntly. He avoided making eye contact, choosing to look instead at the glass on the floor. "I used the *Cruciatus* curse on her and… and it wasn't great."

Hermione's magic stilled. Harry kept his gaze downcast and forced himself to tell her all of it. "I tortured her and after I finally lifted it, I–I–I…"

He finally looked up. "I would have killed her, Hermione," he said. "I think I really would have done it. I felt it. I just… Voldemort disarmed me first."

Hermione stared and stared, her magic oddly quiet. She kept ahold of his elbow and looked into his eyes—his now red, red eyes.

Harry waited for her to say something. To admonish him, maybe, or to reassure him that no, of course he wouldn't have killed her—but to his great surprise, she just shook her head. "I don't exactly blame you," she said, sounding much too conversational for it to be anything other than at least a little forced. "It's not like she wouldn't have deserved it."

“That’s… that’s your response to that?” Harry said, gaping. “I’m not sure you understand, Hermione. I was—I almost used the killing curse. You know, *Avada Kedavra*. I swear it. I raised my arm, started to say it and everything.”

“I do understand. I believe you,” Hermione said. “In case you’ve forgotten, Harry… you’re not the only person in this room who can now claim to have tried very hard, and with great intention, to kill her.”

Harry blinked, feeling stupid that he didn’t immediately realize what she was talking about.

Hermione, outside of Hogwarts, on the run. Hermione, newly pregnant and choosing to leave Ron behind, but not without taking a good piece of the Forbidden Forest out with her.

Hermione, casting a very dark curse indeed at Bellatrix Lestrange, severing her arm in the process… right before disappearing in a plume of phoenix flames.

“Ah,” Harry said brilliantly. Hermione raised one brow at him, then shook her head again.

“We are in unprecedented times, Harry,” she murmured. She looked down at the broken glass bits, looking deplorable once more. “And while I wish we could say we’re all just as innocent and pure as we’ve always been… well, we’re doing the best we can, given the circumstances. If you’re looking for some long-winded lecture about how you should be ashamed for even thinking about using dark magic because it ruins you or something, you won’t be hearing it from me.”

She sighed heavily, then looked at his hand. “Has it been getting any better?”

“Yeah… a bit,” Harry said. He flexed his fingers experimentally. It was true; the shaking was better than it had been right afterwards. But it was taking much longer than he’d like to return to normal.

“It’ll get there,” Hermione said gently. “Just try not to make a habit out of casting Unforgivables.”

“I won’t,” Harry promised—and it felt much better to make such a vow to Hermione than it had to the Dark Lord. “I made a deal with Voldemort, incidentally.”

Hermione perked back up again, magic spiking with interest and alarm. “You did what now?”

“Nothing irresponsible—really!” Harry began, for Hermione looked like she was about to scold him before he’d even explained. “I swore I wouldn’t use Unforgivables anymore, and in exchange, I’m getting McGonagall out of Azkaban. Tonight.”

Hermione looked extremely shocked. “And,” Harry went on, feeling a bit proud now, “I’ll be getting a list, eventually, of everyone who was stuffed into Azkaban after the war, and—and… And that’s pretty good, isn’t it?”

Harry smiled brightly. He didn’t have it in him to talk about Neville. Not right now.

“It… yes, Harry, it is,” Hermione said slowly, suspiciously. “It’s… too good.”

Harry frowned. “I can be persuasive when I want to be.”

“I’m sure. But that? That’s a lot to agree to, Harry… Why does he care so much about you not using Unforgivables?”

She looked at him thoughtfully, like she might be able to discern the answer from his face alone.

“I… uh, maybe he’s feeling threatened,” he mumbled. “You know. Me being his prophesied enemy and all. That didn’t just go away, despite the rubbish he spewed at my trial. He probably doesn’t want me getting any dark and dangerous tendencies, you know?”

Hermione hummed thoughtfully. “Maybe,” she said. But Harry could tell she didn’t entirely believe that.

“Who cares why? I did a good thing, for once. Can we just focus on that? A success?”

Hermione nodded stiffly. “Yes, I suppose you’re right. I didn’t even know McGonagall was in Azkaban… I wonder who else has been locked up in there.”

“I should know soon enough.”

“And you’ll share with the class?”

“I’ll share with *you,* if that’s what you mean.”

“And what will you do when we inevitably see other names of Order members or people who were unfairly incarcerated?”

“…Strike another deal with the devil?”

“*No,* Harry,” Hermione admonished. “Let me think of something, okay? I’m in the Ministry now, if I can’t do anything myself, I… I should be able to figure something out. Don’t go bartering with him by yourself anymore. Ever. Okay?”

“I… make no such promises.”

“Harry!”

“Okay, okay!” Harry said, throwing his hands up. Still shaky. “I will do my very best to not make deals with Lord Voldemort, all right?”

Hermione looked like she did not believe him in the slightest. “Great,” she murmured regardless.

She returned her focus to the broken glass. Harry followed her gaze.

“How has *this* been going?” he asked, glad to shift the conversation.

“How do you think?” Hermione gestured sadly down towards the fragments, which did not appear to have moved at all. “I don’t have any idea what I’m doing, Harry… I’ve never done intentional wandless magic before. Every time it’s happened for me, it was very… emotionally charged. I didn’t think about it, it just happened, you know?”

“I do,” Harry said. “I once grew all my hair back overnight after my aunt Petunia shaved me bald when I was a kid, did I ever tell you that?”

“She *what?* No, you haven’t.” Hermione looked at his thick, unruly hair and grinned. “Bald? Completely bald?”

“Well, no, she left my bangs. Some fringe to, you know, hide this *hideous* scar.”

Hermione laughed. “Oh, no—I’m sorry, Harry, that must have looked dreadful!”

“You think? Why d’you imagine I wandlessly grew it all back somehow? I was very *emotionally charged* afterwards. She was furious, mind, but couldn’t be too mad because she couldn’t admit magic was

definitely at play."

"At least she didn't shave it again."

"True. What a saint, my dear aunt." Harry sighed theatrically. "Anyway. Luckily for you, I've lost my wand privileges for the moment, so I'm in excellent shape to help out here."

"Is that right?" Hermione said dully. She shook her head again, her messy curls falling over her face. "I don't know if that's a good idea, Harry. He might be angry if he learns I had someone try to help me, especially you."

"Well then the Dark Lord would have no one to be angry with but himself, because he didn't specify that you couldn't have help, did he? He only said you couldn't leave the room. Never said anything about other people coming in or coaching you."

"Oh? Coaching me now, are you? What, have you been working on wandless magic in your spare time?"

"Perhaps," Harry said mysteriously. "I am full of surprises."

Hermione looked unimpressed, but she shrugged. "All right then. What do you suggest? Because the more I focus on these pieces of glass—the more I imagine casting a *reparo,* the harder it seems to be. The only thing I've managed to do so far is make a few pieces sort of jiggle for a second. That and give myself a headache."

"Can you try it for me?" Harry asked. "Might be helpful, someone seeing it from an outside perspective."

Hermione pursed her lips, then nodded. "All right. I'll try."

Hermione looked intently at one particular shard of glass. She stared and stared, laser-focused, until her face started to turn pink. Harry could tell she was no longer breathing.

But it was her magic that he really paid attention to.

Hermione's burgundy aura was not settling around the glass at all; it was not behaving nearly in the same way as when she had shattered it. Instead it was coiling tightly around *her,* little corkscrew-like spirals that seemed to be going inward, not outward. Harry could certainly see why it would give her a headache.

“I think I see the problem,” Harry said.

Hermione snapped her attention to him, looking frustrated. “You do?”

“Yes. You need to breathe, for one. Did you even realize you’ve been holding your breath? Keep it up and you’ll end up passing out.”

Hermione looked like she might yell at him, but then changed her mind. “Okay. Breathing. I can do that. Still don’t think it will make any difference.”

“Might I suggest a different approach…? Close your eyes.”

Hermione did not close her eyes. She looked at Harry with about as much intensity as she had the shard of glass.

“It can’t hurt, right? Just trust me. Close your eyes.”

“…Okay,” Hermione relented. She did as he said, though she was frowning.

“Good,” said Harry. “Now, take in a deep breath—slowly—and then exhale. Slowly.”

Hermione did, and Harry breathed with her. By the time she was exhaling, her frown was less pronounced and her magic was a little less coiled.

“Good,” Harry said. “Again.”

They breathed in. They breathe out. “Again,” Harry repeated, and on it went, until Harry was satisfied with the way Hermione’s magic was moving—fluid and peaceful once more.

“Okay,” Harry finally said after one last, calming exhale. “Good… now, instead of focusing on one piece of glass, on wrist movements and incantations or any of that, keep your eyes closed and think instead about the vase. About the wholeness of it. How it should be; how *you* can make it.”

Hermione nodded, and her magic began to undulate, at first radiating outward—Harry grinned—but then her brows knit together again, and it stopped.

“You’re holding your breath again,” Harry pointed out. “Breathe.”

She did, but she seemed to be getting more frazzled, not less. “Okay,

just—maybe—picture this," Harry said, a new idea coming to him. "Forget the vase altogether for a moment. Instead, try to feel your magic."

"My *magic?*"

"Yes. Try to feel it, your magic, your power… imagine that it's all around you, sort of moving with you, swaying back and forth in waves, in big, burgundy waves…"

Hermione's eyes cracked open. "Burgundy waves?" she said, sounding more skeptical than ever.

"Just try it! And close your eyes," Harry demanded.

"It sounds strangely specific. Also, illogical."

"Do you want my help or not?"

"I'm honestly not sure—burgundy waves? *Do* I want your help?"

"Yes! You do! Now shut and relax and do what I say. Pretend I'm—I'm Lockhart or something, someone you would actually listen to. Before he lost his marbles and when you wrongly adored him, at least."

Hermione looked affronted, but then she grinned, amused. "All right, fine," she said. She closed her eyes. "I'm *listening.*"

"Good… okay. Take another deep breath… one more… good. Now imagine it. Your magic, flowing all around you… It's deep, and fluid, and strong… swaying back and forth like the tide of the ocean… Keep breathing… good. *Good."*

Hermione's face had become serene, but at Harry's praise, her lips curled into a slight smile. "Can you imagine it?" Harry asked, deeply curious himself.

"I think so. Maybe… I'm not sure."

"Let's pretend you do," Harry said, excited. "Now imagine that your magic—these waves of wine red, imagine that you move them, like—like they're extra limbs. They're yours, after all, but they're also magic… they can do the impossible. *You* can do the impossible."

"I can do the impossible," Hermione echoed in a whisper.

"That's the spirit."

Her magic whirled wider and brighter. He recalled how it had been when Voldemort's magic put all the other glasses back together, and tried to envision Hermione's doing something similar. "Now imagine them growing longer. You don't need to see the glass, your magic knows it's there and so do you… Imagine that your magic is wrapping around *all* the pieces of the vase, not just a single shard, because it can… That's what your magic can do, it's *strong…"*

Hermione's deep aura was growing; it was swelling and moving out in several long, dark strands… They separated and splintered off, and she was doing it, Harry thought with glee, she was moving her magic and it was grazing the glass and the shards *moved—*

Hermione gasped, her eyes flying open. Her magic retracted back. The shards, which Harry swore were just about to do *something*, stopped.

"I felt it!" Hermione said. "I swear, it felt like… like…"

"Like a repairing spell?" Harry said hopefully.

"Er, no, actually. But it felt… well, magical."

"I think you nearly had it. I think they were just about to move, I really do!"

Hermione beamed at him. "Really?" she said, to which Harry nodded. Then she looked at him suspiciously again. "How are you good at this?" she asked. "This… coaching. Can you easily perform wandless magic intentionally?"

"Me? Oh, goodness no," Harry said, laughing. "I'm just a great motivator. And creative, I guess."

"I'll say," Hermione said. She let out a puff of air, then shook her curls out again. "And you've been very helpful already. But I think I'm onto something now. You should go and check on Ron or… sleep or something. You look pretty bad, Harry. You could probably use some rest."

"Thank you, but absolutely not." Harry said. "There's no way I'm leaving here until that vase is fully repaired. I'll stay here all night if I have to."

When Hermione opened her mouth to argue, Harry lifted his hands. "Look. They're getting better. Helping you is a great distraction, so really, I want to stay. Helping you is helping me."

When she still looked uncertain, Harry grabbed her hand. “Please? Think of it as payback for the time you coached me to be a master of summoning spells. You didn’t give up on me then. I’m not giving up on you now.”

Hermione smiled, seemingly despite her best efforts. “Okay,” she said. “You can stay… but if I don’t make much progress in a few hours, you have to go then. I’m not sure exactly when he’ll be back, but if I haven’t figured this out before then, I don’t think you should be here.”

“Oh, I’ll definitely be here either way,” Harry vowed. “I’m not leaving you alone with a pissy Dark Lord. What? Seriously, fuck him.”

Hermione looked stunned at the way he both casually yet bitterly cursed Lord Voldemort. “Harry! You shouldn’t—what if he were to *hear* that somehow?”

“I don’t really care. Now quit distracting us from the task at hand. We have work to do, don’t we? You’re the brightest witch of our age, I reckon we can knock this out in a few hours if you focus. We’ll have it back together again in no time.”

Hermione grinned and nodded.

“Excellent,” Harry said. “Now close your eyes again, and a big inhale… good…”

They worked until the darkness of night slowly gave way to the soft light of morning. By the time dawn had fully broken, there was a pristine, perfectly intact vase between them, beautiful and whole once more.

A Morning of Punishments

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry stood as still as he possibly could, waiting.

It hadn't been long, but already he felt jumpy with nerves. Hermione was no better; she was pacing back and forth, her hands writhing together in front of her and her magic billowing with worry. But that was all well and fine, she could be as fidgety as she wanted.

She wasn't the one hiding in the corner beneath a cloak of invisibility.

She'd fought him on it, of course.

That's a terrible idea, Harry.

What if he figures out you're hiding there, Harry?

What if he doesn't *figure out you're hiding there right away, but learns about it later, Harry?*

To which Harry's replies had been, in order:

It's not.

He won't.

Well, maybe it is, and maybe he will, but it doesn't matter, because if he does it won't be hard to convince him that I refused to leave and you couldn't make me, which reminds me—you can't make me leave, so you'd better get on board. I'm not leaving you alone with him, but I don't want him to get angry at you for having help, so I'm going to hide right here.

Which wasn't a lie, not really (though it was inaccurate–Hermione could have made him leave if she'd really felt compelled to; she had a wand, he did not)… but it wasn't the truth, either. The *real* reason Harry wanted to be invisible was not to potentially avoid getting Hermione in trouble for having help, but because Harry wanted to learn something. *Could* the Dark Lord find him if he was under the cloak with his eyes closed? Harry did not know for certain yet, because while he had been able to hide in the forest outside the manor for a time, it hadn't lasted long… and Harry really, really wanted to

know if hiding in the future from Lord Voldemort would ever be possible, even if it was just for a few moments when he was using Occlumency against him.

The minutes dragged on. It was getting later and later, and Harry was starting to become ever more pissed. How long was Voldemort going to make her wait before checking in on her? Hermione was pregnant, and while it could be attributed solely to nerves, she looked even more nauseous than when she'd first come back early from their honeymoon. That, and she obviously hadn't slept all night, so Harry was beginning to become worried.

He was just about to whisper some words of encouragement to her when he felt it: Voldemort's deep and glimmering magic. Harry swallowed hard, drew in a deep breath, and closed his eyes.

The door swung open, and Hermione's magic spasmed in surprise.

"Hermione Granger," Voldemort greeted with the sort of faux-polite tone that Harry knew all too well. "Has my most valuable Death Eater performed her task…?"

Harry was sorely tempted to open his eyes to see his reaction, but didn't dare. It was almost as satisfying to feel only his magic. Voldemort's dark aura brightened with what Harry could tell was shock at first, then quickly glittered with… annoyance?

"Y-yes, my Lord," Hermione said. Harry imagined that she was holding the now perfectly intact vase out for him to inspect.

There were a few beats of silence in which Harry's mind raced, wondering what he was thinking. Voldemort's magic glimmered and swirled in conflicting ways.

"I see," he murmured. Was he holding the vase now himself? Examining it? "Of course, I would like to believe that you did this the way in which you were instructed… but I'm sure you won't be surprised to find that I require some confirmation."

There was a heartbeat where Hermione's magic went stagnant with cold fear, and Voldemort's rose up in anticipation.

"*Legilimens*."

Oh, fuck.

Harry had to squeeze his eyes shut very hard to keep from opening them. Hermione let out a horrible cry and her magic spiraled in pain as Voldemort was certainly ripping through her mind, and fuck, why, *why* hadn't he anticipated this?

Of course Voldemort would look into her mind to see *exactly* what she did, *exactly* how she did it.

Harry debated running for it. If he moved quickly enough, he might be able to make it down the hall and out of the room before Voldemort realized he had been there to begin with. He might be confused for long enough when Harry wasn't there for him to get out of the manor altogether, even.

Harry crushed that notion nearly as soon as he had it. If anything, he had to stay now more than ever. He couldn't leave Hermione alone with him before, and he certainly couldn't if Voldemort discovered that she allowed Harry to not only help her, but to hide out in the corner, invisible.

But on the very slim chance that he *didn't* see that… Harry kept his eyes closed.

Hermione's magic bloomed out around her all at once, releasing in relief as Voldemort must have withdrawn. His aura was much brighter now, the golden specks shining almost happily.

"Impressive," he murmured. "You managed to instinctively shroud certain aspects of your recent memory. You have a natural gift for Occlumency."

"I… I do?"

Hermione magic perked up slightly at the praise. Had she somehow managed to stop Voldemort from seeing him, Harry, deciding to hide in the corner? Harry felt a spark of hope.

"Yes, a rare gift indeed. Certain people are born with an inclination for the Mind Arts. It's a shame that it wasn't picked up on and nurtured from the moment you became a student at Hogwarts. You could have been exceedingly proficient at Occlumency years ago… Regardless, your instinctual skills will come in handy when you begin proper training with Bellatrix soon."

Harry's stomach churned at the sound of her name, not to mention *why* he was saying it.

“What?”

Oh, right. Ron hadn’t had the heart to tell her when he found out… this was all news to poor Hermione. Her aura vibrated with shock.

“Yes, you will be required to be a master of Occlumency as my most *valued* Death Eater, considering the secrets you hold… but that is a conversation for another time. You kept some things mildly hazy, but I daresay I saw more than enough. You followed instructions. You did not use a wand to reassemble the vase you shattered. *Very* well done. Your master is pleased with you.”

Another beat, in which Harry dared to believe that would be the end of it. Voldemort’s magic twinkled and danced.

“However.”

Harry’s scar erupted in pain.

He’d half-expected it, but that didn’t make it hurt any less. Harry howled, his hand flying to his forehead.

The onslaught was brutal but brief. Harry’s eyes—now watering from the pain—opened to see Voldemort looking directly at him. He was smiling.

Harry ripped the cloak off and glared back at him.

“Why, Harry,” Voldemort said, one brow raising in mildly feigned shock. “What a pleasant surprise.”

What was *not* pleasant was Voldemort’s magic. It had turned into a black cloud of rage. Despite his thin smile, there was no mistake about it—Lord Voldemort was *furious* that Harry had attempted to hide in plain sight from him. He was probably *more* furious that, had he not looked into Hermione’s mind…

Well. It could have worked.

Harry had about a hundred different things he wanted to yell at him, but what he bit out instead was, “It wasn’t Hermione’s fault. I pretty much forced my help on her. You can’t be mad at her for that.”

It wasn’t until Harry said it out loud that a new worry gripped him. Had Voldemort witnessed the details of their discussion? Of Harry describing Hermione’s magic?

Would he find that… suspicious?

“Did I say I was *mad* at her?” Voldemort's aura glinted with gold, but not in a friendly way. Far from it. “No. I believe I said I was pleased with her, in fact.”

He turned to face Hermione. “Take today and tomorrow to rest. You will be given details as to when your Occlumency training will start soon… as well as details regarding your new position. Educational reform is going to be one of our top priorities.”

Voldemort gestured towards the door, a clear dismissal. Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, “Your *husband* is in the West Wing recovering… though I’m sure you’re already aware of that, as well as why he’s there in the first place.”

He said the word *husband* like it left a bad taste in his mouth. Harry wondered if it was because he found Ron so much less impressive than her, or if it was merely because he was disappointed with Ron’s recent dueling performance. Harry’s rage mounted, angry either way.

Hermione nodded, but her eyes darted to Harry, and she didn’t move.

“Great. I’ll walk with you, Hermione.”

Harry marched over to her, shoving his cloak in his pocket as he went, and grabbed Hermione by the hand. He pulled her along with him towards the door.

“Stay.”

Harry almost didn’t listen. He probably wouldn’t have, if the next words out of Voldemort’s mouth weren’t, “assuming you would like your wand back.”

Harry turned despite himself to see Voldemort holding the yew wand, not pointing it at him like the weapon it was but instead with the handle facing out. Harry’s pulse picked up at the sight.

Would the yew wand still recognize him as its master…? Or would it be disloyal to him now that Voldemort had disarmed him?

Could he still be the Master of Death…?

“Go on,” Harry muttered to Hermione. “Go find Ron. I’ll be there later.”

Hermione gave him a weak smile and squeezed his fingers, then left. The door slammed shut behind her in a flash of Voldemort's magic.

"Look," Harry said, holding up both of his hands. "No more shaking. I'll take that back, then."

He reached for the wand. It was not surprising in the slightest when Voldemort did not immediately allow him to take it. He held it up a fraction too high for him to grab.

"Before you regain *any* privileges," Voldemort hissed, his magic blackening venomously again, "explain to me *why* you thought it wise to attempt to *hide from me."*

"So you wouldn't get all pissy at Hermione for having help," Harry snapped. "I didn't realize that you'd use Legilimency on her, which was a mistake on my part, because of *course* you would."

"You should have left her when she completed her task."

"And leave her alone with you? I don't think so," Harry scoffed. "I'll never do that if I don't have to, especially when she's not at her best… she's my friend. Not that I expect you to understand that."

Voldemort's magic whirled. Annoyed. *Offended.* "I would have thought the very recent demonstration you observed would have led you to realize the opposite. I clearly *do* value the… *friendship* of others. Their loyalty and skills are necessary, in fact."

The mirthless laugh that escaped Harry's lips was uncontainable. "Yeah, I was led to believe a *lot* of things in that demonstration, but *friendship* wasn't one of them," he said. "You know what? Fuck it. Keep the wand. I'd rather you hang on to it for now then stand here and have to continue this conversation for another second."

Harry tried to wrench the door open, but it was, naturally, locked. He just about threw a fit. Harry's muscles all tensed, and it took every ounce of self-control that he had left to not slam his fists on the door, to not try ripping off the handle, to not kick it, to not *scream*. To not grab the newly fixed vase Hermione had set on the bar ledge and chuck it at Voldemort's face.

"Let. Me. Out," Harry said, his teeth clenched painfully tight.

"*What* is the meaning of this?"

It was only because of the way his magic glistened, becoming less enraged and more confused, that Harry looked at him again. Voldemort's expression matched his aura. Irate, certainly, but increasingly befuddled.

"The meaning of what?"

"Your *relentless*, overwhelming emotions! Again!"

Voldemort flicked his wrists, switching the position of the yew wand to the more appropriate, lethal positioning. With his hand suddenly on the handle, the tip flared with a white-hot light. Maybe that was just because *he* was now emotional. Maybe it was because it felt much more at home in the Dark Lord's hands than it ever would Harry's. "Your *obscure* rage that's so strong I've been feeling it on the outskirts of *my* mind, flickering on and off, *all night! What* is wrong with you this time?"

Harry was so affronted by this question, this *accusation*, that he actually gasped. "What's wrong with *me?"* he responded. "What's wrong with *you!*"

Harry knew he shouldn't shout the things he was about to, but he couldn't stop the words from tumbling out of his mouth—words very similar to one's he'd hurled at Lord Voldemort before.

"*You*, who seem determined to prove, again and again, that you're the biggest fucking hypocrite in the entire world! *You,* with your possessiveness and—and all your bullshit and—and making it very clear—in private, of course—that I'm *your property,* no one else's, even still, to the extent that I worry for the very lives of everyone I care about every single day, despite your little promises—oh, but *you, you* can just do whatever you like, and after everything you've done to me, everything you've gotten *insanely* pissed off about, you have the actual nerve to parade *that bitch* around—"

Harry abruptly stopped talking. He turned away, running his hands through his hair. "I can't do this right now," he said in a much quieter voice. "I am too exhausted to deal with your selfishness. Not that it's anything new."

Voldemort ignored the insults. "Parade?" he repeated. His magic was becoming less angry and confused, turning now towards… intrigued.

"You're referring to the demonstrative duel with Bellatrix… as *parading…?"*

His lips curled into a smile. “Harry… Are you *jealous*?”

Harry didn’t mean for it to happen. He didn’t even have the intention —there was a flare of magic that was definitely *Harry's*, and suddenly the vase exploded in a violent *crack*.

Glass went everywhere, thousands of tiny shards littering the entire room. Neither of them had time to so much as throw their hands up. The fragments assaulted them both and scattered everywhere, infinitely more pieces than when Hermione had broken it. Harry blinked, and he swore he could see some of it floating in the air, crystalline dust dancing in the light. It was a miracle none of it got in his eyes.

There was a moment following the explosion where both Harry and Voldemort were silent. Harry noticed, with no small degree of pleasure, that Voldemort had a few small cuts on one side of his face which were beginning to swell with droplets of blood. Then he lifted his hands to his own face and realized he had the same problem.

Voldemort’s eyes locked with Harry’s. He stared, those red irises wide in the aftermath of that violent, unintended magic. Harry swallowed hard, unsure of what Voldemort would do next and equally unsure of what would be worse. Was he going to laugh? Leer and gloat? Become enraged again and make his scar burn with horrible pain until he was on his knees, writhing in agony until he begged him to stop, finally submissive?

When Voldemort moved, crossing the room until there was very little space between them, Harry flinched, bracing himself and closing his eyes. “Allow me to make something perfectly clear,” he said softly. Voldemort’s magic was not hostile. It was whirling with something else now, something familiar and mind-numbing. That feeling of fondness was curling at the corners, glimmering in gold.

“Nothing and no one, ever…”

He put the tip of the yew wand beneath Harry’s chin, forcing him to lift his face. Harry opened his eyes.

“*Ever*… will compare to you, my light.”

My light. Harry felt like a lump had suddenly formed in his throat, making it impossible to respond.

Voldemort’s face was too close to his. His eyes darted down to Harry’s

lips and back to his eyes again.

Harry *hated* how infuriatingly attractive he was now. Hated that, when Voldemort was leaning over him like this, hunger glinting in his magic and in his eyes… that he felt it, too.

“Permission?” Voldemort murmured, the tip of the wand still pressed into his chin.

Harry forced himself to speak, despite the heat that flamed across his skin. “Permission… permission to do what?”

“Everything,” Voldemort answered.

His eyes went to Harry’s mouth again. Harry made the mistake of doing the same thing, his gaze going to the Dark Lord’s lips, and he tilted his head, bringing them closer… Harry could feel his breath, could feel the beginnings of that warmth blooming between them…

“No.”

Harry took an abrupt step backwards, forcing that intoxicating light away. “No, we’re not—I’m still—I…”

Harry shook his head, willing his skin to cool and his heart to stop pounding. To his surprise—and great annoyance—Voldemort did not seem angry at his retreat.

“You’re upset with me,” the Dark Lord said. He didn’t look unhappy about it. He was amused.

“Extremely, yeah,” Harry said tersely.

“Because I *paraded* Bellatrix around.”

“I hate her,” Harry hissed. He barely stopped himself from yelling the words ‘I’m not jealous!’, because even as angry as he was, Harry could tell that would sound as good as a confession. “It’s because I don’t want to see *her,* ever, and I don't want her anywhere near Hermione, either. She’s done too many atrocious things. She *killed Sirius—”*

Harry wasn’t sure what happened. There was another brilliant flash of magic, and the next thing he knew he was on the ground, his ears ringing, the room tilting sideways.

Voldemort was kneeling in front of him. He did not look amused now.

“Harry,” he said. He had one hand on his face and the other on his shoulder. “Breathe.”

Harry blinked slowly as the room righted himself. “What… what happened?” he breathed.

“You,” Voldemort said simply.

Harry looked over his shoulder. It was not difficult to see what he meant—three of the barstools and one cushioned chair were now destroyed, one long, horizontal slash having torn through them like some kind of massive, magical machete.

“You are likely depleted,” Voldemort went on. “Casting an Unforgivable, not sleeping, and now failing to contain your magic due to emotion… you’ve reached your limit.”

Harry glared at him, pushing himself up into a slightly more dignified sitting position. Voldemort’s hand dropped from his face, but not from his shoulder. “I’ve done much more than that without reaching my limit,” he muttered.

“That’s likely true,” Voldemort amended, to Harry’s surprise. His magic was nearly soft now. “But you’ve never been influenced by the Elixir of Life before, and you were not given a small amount of it. I imagine it caused you to use much more of your power when you cursed Bellatrix than you otherwise would have. It does not take long to deplete yourself when casting dark spells… they take whatever you are willing to give, then ask for more. Always.”

Harry thought about that, and realized he was right. He may not have held that *Cruciatus* curse for a very long time, but he had absolutely put everything he’d had into it, and had felt compelled to do *more*.

The rush of power had been… dizzying.

Voldemort’s hands reached for his. He grazed his lips softly across his knuckles before standing, pulling Harry, who was somewhat reluctant, along with him. “Come,” the Dark Lord said. His magic was a dark, glistening sheen, like a twilight sky. “You should rest, but before you do… and you’re coming with me.”

“Going with you where?”

“The Ministry. You will understand why soon enough. It won’t take long. But first.”

Voldemort grabbed hold of Harry's shoulder again, and without warning they disapparated. They reappeared in Harry's bedroom.

Harry felt a thrill of nervousness assault him as his eyes settled on the now perfectly made bed. One would have never guessed what happened there recently.

"Drink."

Harry had completely missed the goblet that was now sitting on his bedside table. Voldemort gestured to it, but Harry was distracted when he then moved across the room, going to the vanity. Voldemort looked at himself in the mirror, tilting his face as he examined the many small, bleeding cuts on one side. With a slightly amused look, he lifted the yew wand to himself and wordlessly mended the tiny wounds and vanished the spidery lines of blood that littered his cheek. Harry was reminded viscerally of the time Voldemort had cleaned blood from his face once before, after he'd put his mouth against Harry's and nearly *bitten off his tongue*…

Their first, violent kiss.

Voldemort's eyes met Harry's in the mirror. Harry startled; he had been blatantly staring at him, *ogling* him, watching him work.

Voldemort smirked. "Don't worry," he murmured. "Yours are already healed… but you're still due for another dose."

He turned around to face him. "Drink," Voldemort repeated. "And then I'll return your wand."

He flipped the yew wand around again, aiming the handle towards Harry.

Harry heaved a sigh and decided it was better not to argue. He picked up the goblet, lifted it to his lips, and drank.

The cold, metallic taste of the elixir flowed over his tongue. The second he swallowed, Harry felt that sensation of being infinite singing in his blood. He drank until the goblet was empty, then set it back on the bedside table.

Power. Harry felt so *alive* with it.

"Good boy," Voldemort said, looking pleased.

Harry narrowed his eyes—he *hated* when he said that—but instead of deigning his condescending words with a response, he reached for the wand.

It felt… well. Not *wrong,* but maybe not right, either. Harry pursed his lips as he turned it in his hand, examining the yew. He probably would have a better feel for it, he mused, if he cast a spell…

"Hold still," Voldemort said. Then, to Harry's confusion, he wordlessly —and wandlessly—conjured a piece of fabric. He held Harry's chin with one hand and with the other used the newly-formed white cloth to wipe his face.

It took Harry a second to realize that, just because the Elixir made his wounds heal, it didn't make blood vanish. For whatever reason, Voldemort had decided he wanted to physically wipe the stains on his face away rather than use magic. It baffled him, the sheer… muggle-ness of it, but then Voldemort was cleaning his cheek, his movements exceedingly precise and gentle, his own face so very close to Harry's as he rubbed the soft cloth back and forth, and back again… His eyes were darkened and his magic was glittering with unbound fondness…

It was all unexpected and oddly intimate enough that Harry didn't even think to tell him he could do that himself. By the time Voldemort was done, Harry's face must have been as red as the blood he was trying to clean off.

Voldemort lowered the cloth. He ran his thumb along Harry's freshly cleaned skin, and then his eyes went to Harry's. "Better," he murmured.

Harry felt frozen in place. Voldemort's magic was hazy with want, and they were alone, in his bedroom, literally inches away from the bed…

"Come."

Voldemort dropped his hand and backed away, acting like no intense moment had transpired—though the lust glinting in his magic remained. "We have somewhere to be."

Harry's mind felt scrambled. Trying desperately to seem as aloof and unaffected as Voldemort was acting, he cleared his throat and shoved the wand in his pocket. "What, are we going to be late for some important appointment?"

"Yes."

“Wait—really?”

Harry had to rush to keep up with him, for Voldemort had already turned and was walking through the door, out of Harry’s bedroom.

“Yes,” he said again.

“What for?” He frowned. “Isn’t it Saturday?”

Voldemort’s eyes flickered to him for only a moment, but Harry could see the amusement there, as well as feel it in his aura. It felt similar to when they had gone to meet Umbridge at the Ministry. Harry wasn’t sure if this was a good omen or not.

“There are no weekends off for the Wizarding World’s new Lord and ruler, Harry. You will have to forgive me for what you’re about to witness, however… At first, you are going to be even more upset with me than you already are. But you won’t be by the end of it.” A pause. “Probably not, I don’t think,” he added. He flashed Harry a wicked grin. “I promise that’s not my intention going into this. This is a gift, not a punishment. *No more questions.”*

He said the last words sternly, for Harry had opened his mouth, clearly about to ask several.

“That’s… not at all reassuring,” Harry said instead.

Voldemort’s only response to that was a dark, low laugh.

Floor nine, Courtroom ten. Just below the Department of Mysteries.

Harry would have been happy to live out the rest of his potentially unending days never stepping foot in this room again, but Voldemort had other plans.

Unlike Harry, who was anxious and uncertain of what to do when they arrived, the Dark Lord wasted no time making himself right at home. He swept into the ominous, empty hall and sat exactly where he had last time they’d been there—right in the front and center of where the Wizengamot had presided.

Harry lingered near the door, hesitant (understandably, in his opinion) to go much further into the courtroom. He looked at the chair in the middle and had flashbacks of sitting in it, being caught and bound by the chains that were currently lifeless on the ground when he’d acted

out.

“I’m not sitting there,” Harry said.

“Of course not. You’re not on trial… you’ll sit here.”

Voldemort gestured next to himself. Harry was thoroughly confused.

“I… would like to ask a question,” he said. Mainly, *Why the hell are we here?*

Voldemort’s magic shone with mirth and he smiled; he was obviously having a grand time. “I’m sure you would,” he said. “Come. Sit. All your burning questions will be answered momentarily.”

Walking as slowly as he dared, Harry obeyed. Every footstep echoed, reinforcing just how empty, lifeless, and cold this place was. *Maybe we’re just here because the psychotic Dark Lord is feeling nostalgic,* he mused. *Perhaps we’ll visit the Hall of Prophecies later, too, while we’re here.*

But he knew that wasn’t the case. He said he’d had an appointment… but with whom remained to be seen.

Harry sat. Nothing felt stranger than being at Lord Voldemort’s side in *this* empty courtroom at the Ministry of Magic.

The seconds ticked past. Harry had to bite his tongue to stop from asking anything. Voldemort checked his watch, and Harry observed the inane action with something like fascination. It was such a contrite gesture, very human, and his watch—it was old, wasn’t it? It was even older looking than the one Harry had once had, not some fancy new thing, and where had he gotten it? It could pass for a muggle watch, Harry thought, and—oh God—had he murdered someone for that? Had it belonged to his grandfather, maybe? Or perhaps—?

Just as it struck nine o’clock, Harry felt the glimmer of another source of magic, derailing his thoughts. It was nearing the stairwell that was the entryway to the courtroom. It was dark, and wavy, and a burgundy-red.

It was very unlikely to be Hermione’s, since he’d just given her the day to rest.

Harry barely stopped himself from jumping to his feet as she was almost upon them. He knew his body had gone rigid, so he quickly

tried to mask the reaction by shifting his weight, crossing his ankle over his leg, acting like he didn't suddenly taste acid on his tongue.

If Voldemort noticed anything odd about him, he didn't mention it. Still looking at his watch, he murmured, "This is the part where you'll be upset."

There was a knock on the door, a dull rapping that echoed and echoed.

"Enter," Voldemort said.

Bellatrix Lestrange.

If her magic was anything to go by, this was an appointment where some non-Ministry approved judgment was about to happen. It was swirling with anxiety, but even so, she held her head high. Her dark eyes found Harry's as she approached, and it was clear by her expression that she had not been informed that he was going to be here.

Dolores Umbridge, Bellatrix Lestrange… Harry wondered how many other people that he despised were going to meet with him and the Dark Lord.

Despite looking shocked at Harry's, Bellatrix, like Umbridge, was not foolish enough to question it. She walked with a dignity that might have impressed Harry had it been anyone else, and without needing to be told, she sat in the chair in the center. The chains rattled on the ground, stirring like metal snakes. Bellatrix grinned at them, and bizarrely, her magic settled into something more comfortable.

"Hello, old friends," she said mockingly.

The chains twitched for a moment more, then became lifeless again. Beside him, Harry saw Voldemort smirk slightly out of the corner of his eye.

A smirk that Bellatrix shared, and Harry understood why—because the last time she had been in that chair, she had been on trial for being a Death Eater, and she had sat on it like it was a throne, proclaiming her undying loyalty for the Dark Lord…

Because she'd tortured Neville's parents into madness.

Instant, nearly blinding rage burned in Harry's heart at all of it. At her

haughty demeanor, and their little shared smirk. At all that she had done.

“What the *fuck* is this?” Harry seethed. Voldemort’s aura darkened; whether because of Harry’s words or because he could sense his oh-so-annoying emotions, Harry wasn’t sure. His smirk vanished.

“Lower your wand, Harry,” he said. “And sit down.”

Harry blinked. He hadn’t registered that he’d done both of those things. He could feel his heartbeat in his hand where he gripped the yew wand, his hold tight. He had it aimed at Bellatrix, who was also, Harry was glad to see, no longer smiling.

“I told you to keep her away from me,” Harry snarled.

“So you did,” Voldemort agreed. He placed his hand on Harry’s forearm, pushing for him to sit. “And after this, that can be arranged… but first, a punishment is in order.”

Harry half-expected him to say, ‘Surprise! You’re actually the one being punished today. We got you!’ and for them to join forces and turn on him together. When that didn’t happen, and Voldemort only waited, Harry sat.

“My Lord,” Bellatrix said once he had, “I implore—”

“Silence.”

Voldemort’s voice had taken on an icy edge that Harry had not heard from him in some time. His magic became black and cold. “You, my deadliest, strongest, most powerful lieutenant, managed to fall almost instantly when Harry took the opportunity to aim his wand at you. You all but welcomed an attack by taunting him. Your pride nearly got you killed by a *teenager* who has wanted you dead for a very long time, and it happened in front of other young, *impressionable* minds. If not for my own intervention, you would be dead.”

The last sentence made Bellatrix scoff. She was nervous, but she was obviously desperate to diffuse the rage in her master’s voice. “Him? This golden boy? He couldn’t cast the killing—”

“I would have killed you,” Harry cut in. “You would be *dead*.”

Bellatrix held his gaze, looking uncertain and—Harry was thrilled—afraid.

She fell silent. Voldemort continued.

“So, Bellatrix,” he said, speaking conversationally now despite his icy smile, “What shall we do? Your master is displeased with you. Your behavior was unacceptable… and I always punish *bad* behavior.”

Voldemort leaned forward in his seat, his eyes and magic bright with eagerness. “But I am also a gracious and merciful master. You have been a loyal servant for many years… For this, I won’t allow your fate to be up to Harry, though I’m sure he would have more than a few grand ideas about what to do with you.”

“Why am I here, then!?” Harry shouted, instantly indignant—for he had just concluded that this must be why he was brought along. “Why force her presence on me at all?”

Harry folded his arms across his chest, feeling like a child who’d just been given a great treat, only to have it taken away.

Voldemort’s wicked smile was back. “Because I have a few ideas of my own, and they involve you.” He stood. “Come with me.”

Harry did not want to follow him, but there was no use delaying the inevitable. He stood as well, following Voldemort down to where Bellatrix sat, her magic whipping about her nervously as they approached.

“You must stand as well, Bella,” Voldemort said.

She did, and then she winced, her arm that was not made of magical metal tensing. She blinked a few times, then stared at Voldemort with wide eyes.

“My Lord?” she questioned. “You can’t mean—you aren’t serious—”

“I am very serious,” Voldemort said.

Harry frowned, irritated. The Dark Lord had obviously told her something through the Dark Mark, and Harry had no idea what.

“What are—”

“Hold out your hand, Harry.”

Harry arched one brow at him, but Voldemort said nothing else. Harry did. Bellatrix stared at it like his hand was a python about to strike her.

"*Bella*," Voldemort said warningly.

Looking like it pained her to do it—and it probably did—Bellatrix raised her intimidating, metallic hand… and gripped Harry's. It was hard and cold.

Voldemort pulled out the Deathstick, holding it over their intertwined hands.

Harry realized what was about to happen just before it did. Voldemort pinned Bellatrix with a lethal stare, and she swallowed hard before turning her focus to Harry and speaking.

"I vow that I shall not intentionally inflict any harm upon Hermione Jean Granger as I teach her Occlumency to the very best of my abilities, nor shall I share whatever secrets of hers that I uncover with anyone besides the Dark Lord… or you," she said in a voice that was barely above a whisper. Harry's eyes went wide at the promise, the *vow*, that was being made to *him*…

That would kill her if she broke it.

A thin, glowing red rope of magic emitted from the Deathstick. It swirled around Bellatrix's wrist first, then encircled Harry's until it was an undulating loop, trapping them both.

He thought that would be all. Harry was surprised when, after she swallowed hard, she went on.

"I vow that I… I will, from this moment on, treat Harry James Potter with respect and deference, and will never again turn my wand on him with malicious intent."

Another thin, glowing rope. It wrapped around their wrists, joining the first.

Harry's lips parted with shock. He looked at Voldemort, certain this must be a joke—but Voldemort only looked pleased.

"Very good," he said. He looked at Harry. "Unless you can think of something else to add? Something *reasonable*, of course."

Harry's mind raced. Oh, hell, how he wished he'd had time to think about this before just now!

"Er, um… yes," Harry said. Bellatrix's grip on his hand tightened very

much, and her eye twitched more than her deeply unhappy magic. Harry grinned at her. “I’d like a vow that you’ll never turn your wand on Ron and Hermione again, either.”

Voldemort laughed. “She must turn her wand on Hermione, Harry. She is going to be teaching her Occlumency… which I hope you are amenable to now, seeing as she cannot intentionally harm her.”

Harry frowned, but he couldn't think of a good argument to that. “Ron then,” he said. “You put him through enough with your magic, don’t you think?”

“I won’t be able to train him in dueling any more,” Bellatrix said, her teeth clenched.

“Good! You were a horrible teacher!”

“Enough,” Voldemort said. He looked at Bellatrix and sighed, like this was all just so tiresome for him. “Bella. Make the vow that you will not intentionally harm Ronald Weasley so we can be done with this.”

Bella took a deep breath in through her nose, her nostrils flaring. “I vow that I shall not turn my wand on Ronald Weasley with malicious intent,” she muttered.

Another thin rope of magic wrapped around their wrists.

“Oh!” Harry shouted the moment it had formed, the thought suddenly striking him. “Grimmauld Place. I want it back.”

Bellatrix’s grip on his hand was extremely tight. Harry suspected he was losing blood flow to his fingers, but he didn’t mind.

“That was given to her through a magically binding contract, Harry,” Voldemort said.

“So vow that you’ll sign it back over to me,” Harry said tersely. He grabbed her hand more tightly as well, but doubted it bothered her, seeing as it was no longer flesh.

“She can’t, due to certain clauses in the contract. Really, you should have read the fine print.”

Voldemort flashed Harry that damned, crooked grin, and Harry’s face warmed with anger and embarrassment. He hadn’t exactly been in a position where he could *read the fine print* when he’d been forced to

sign that.

“Besides, I believe we’ve forced enough Unbreakable Vows on Bellatrix today,” Voldemort added. He lifted his wand, and the magical ropes vanished. “That is all. You may go, Bella.”

Bellatrix, her magic positively shaking with too many emotions for Harry to untangle, bowed to him. “My Lord,” she said. She took an uneasy step backwards, but then Bellatrix paused. She looked at Harry, and despite how revolted her magic was as she did it… she bowed again.

To *him*.

Then she turned on her heel and was gone, like she was worried she might be forced to make more vows if she stayed a moment longer. The door slammed shut behind her, the sound of it echoing loudly in the chamber.

Harry’s mind buzzed after she left. “Wow,” he said, looking at Voldemort. He was still holding his hand aloft, like she had never released it, like the chords of glowing magic were still there. “That… was…”

Wild, was maybe the word he was looking for, but not even that one felt right.

“I thought you would enjoy knowing that if she ever uses a mocking tone with you again, it would literally kill her.”

“I… do enjoy knowing that,” Harry agreed, a smile spreading across his face. “I hope she screws up and does it anyway.”

“She won’t. Bellatrix has an incredible tenacity for self-preservation. I doubt she’ll go anywhere near you for the rest of her life, if it can be avoided. Nothing will deter Bellatrix from being in your presence more effectively than knowing she will have to treat you with utmost respect.”

Harry laughed. It was true, he realized. And he probably would have believed he’d never see her again if it weren’t for one thing.

“But she’s going to be giving Hermione Occlumency lessons.”

“Yes. I hope that you are now satisfied that she will be a safe teacher for her.”

“That’s not the only reason I don’t want her around Hermione,” Harry said, frowning. “Hermione cut her arm off with a dark curse… and Bellatrix is an evil, cunning witch. She’ll find some way to get revenge, I’m sure of it.”

“Hermione Granger is also a cunning witch. She will be fine.”

“Why can’t someone else just teach her?”

Voldemort’s magic roiled in a way that told Harry he was becoming annoyed, and would soon likely lose all patience with him and his questioning. “Because I would only trust very few people with the knowledge of what you are, Harry, and Bellatrix is not yet one of them… but now she will be. Having her make that particular vow made her the only person who *can* teach her the mind arts.”

“Why don’t you do it?” Harry asked. And what madness was his life, Harry wondered, where he would be pleading for *Voldemort* to be the one forcing himself into Hermione’s mind? “You’re a master of Occlumency and Legilimency, and you’re going to be working with her anyway, aren’t you?”

His magic swelled slightly with a familiar sensation of pride, so Harry pressed his luck. “No one will be a better instructor than you. You're the most powerful, talented wizard in the world, and you’ve already been in her mind once. You said she was a natural, you could probably teach her in half the time that—”

“Enough,” Voldemort said, cutting him off—though his aura has puffed up considerably at the praise. “Bellatrix will be teaching her. I know that I would be superior. That is not the issue.”

“Then what is?”

“As always, *you.”*

Voldemort looked like he was torn between wanting to hit Harry with a stinging hex or grab him and kiss him aggressively on the mouth. Which was alarmingly common for them, but Harry was still unsettled. “I am a busy man, and many things need my constant attention. You are *always* one of them. Whenever I have a shred of leisure time, it will be spent on *you.*”

Harry opened his mouth, but failed to come up with a response.

“Besides,” Voldemort said, “teaching Occlumency is a very tedious

and draining task. I will have my fill of it once I begin teaching *you."*

"I—*what?"*

Voldemort looked like he was on the verge of rolling his eyes at him. "*Harry,"* he said with disappointment. "You didn't honestly believe you could go much longer without the ability to shield your thoughts from outsiders, did you? If you want even an ounce more freedom than you currently have, you will need to be capable."

Voldemort moved closer to him, grabbing one of his hands with both of his. "Until then, my hold on you will remain *very* tight."

Harry's face burned as Voldemort stared down at him, eyes smoldering. His dark and possessive magic was shrouding all around him.

"I… no. Thank you for the offer, but no thanks."

"This is not optional, Harry."

"I'm not—"

"*Enough,"* Voldemort hissed. Harry wondered how many times he was going to throw that word at him this morning. "This is an argument for you to lose another day. I'm not about to start invading your fragile mind this instant; there is too much to be done in the immediate future. And speaking of the immediate future…"

He checked his watch again. "My next… appointment, for lack of a better word, should be here any moment."

"What, you—you planned *another* meeting today?"

"Yes, I did. As I've already said, I am a busy man. If I am going to condemn and punish the people who have been foolish enough to earn *my* attention, I like to make a morning out of it."

Harry felt them, then… the subtle sensations of magic, coming up the stairwell, it seemed… two of them? More? They were moving *very* slowly, like they were postponing this meeting for as long as physically possible…

As they came a bit closer, Harry felt a wave of dread wash over him. That magic felt familiar. Warm, rust-colored, he thought… a little like Ron's…

Oh, no.

Harry pulled his hand away, knowing his face had probably just paled. “You’re not going to kill anyone, are you?” he asked, hoping his suddenly worried look would be attributed to that fear alone.

“No,” Voldemort said. “Not intentionally,” he added, his lips curving. “I have a very different punishment in mind… Consider this meeting a test of your self-control.”

He made his way back to his seat at the center of the raised platform, gesturing for Harry to retake his as well. “Remember,” he said, when Harry did not immediately follow him. “I always reward good behavior… and I always punish bad.”

Harry did not like the way he was smiling, nor did he like the way his aura was glinting, sharp and cold. Wary, Harry resumed his seat.

There was a hesitant knock at the door. Voldemort looked at him and murmured, “Impress me, Harry.”

He flicked his wand towards the door. It flung open. “Come,” Voldemort said, gesturing widely with one arm in a broad, welcoming way. “We have been waiting.”

Fred and George looked, in a word, terrified.

The Weasley twins hovered in the entryway much like Harry had, their magic heavy with apprehension. But they, like Harry, did not dare to linger long. They shared identical looks of utmost shock when they saw Harry there, sitting at Lord Voldemort’s side in the otherwise empty courtroom.

“Harry?” Fred gasped. His aura, slightly redder than George’s, was quivering. Despite how scared he must have been, being summoned to meet the Dark Lord along with his twin, he did manage to put on a brave face. “What in the world are you doing here?”

“Did you *also* get written up for the fifteenth time?” George asked, acting much the same way: sheer panic that was thinly masked.

Harry might have laughed—and he was impressed, to some degree at his ability to crack a joke, even now—but the feeling of Voldemort’s magic made smiling impossible. It was heavy, black, and ominous, and Harry could feel nothing but fear that he too tried desperately to hide.

“Fred and George Weasley,” Voldemort said, not allowing Harry the chance to respond. He smiled widely enough to show all his teeth. “Please, come in. I’m afraid you’ll have to stand, unless one of you would prefer to sit in the single, cursed chair available. I wouldn’t bother. This meeting will be short.”

The twins walked slowly into the center of the chamber. They were dressed nicely, Harry noticed, in plain but appropriate dress robes, giving Harry the impression that they had carefully prepared for this meeting. He wondered if anyone else in their family knew they had an appointment with Lord Voldemort today. Ron definitely hadn’t.

“It’s been *much* too long since our last encounter,” Voldemort said once they stopped, standing together in front of the cursed chair. He was leaning forward, his grin much too wide, his demeanor far too friendly—so at odds with his magic.

“This is far overdue, don’t you agree?”

Fred and George shared confused looks.

“Well?” Voldemort prodded. “*Do you not agree?* Perhaps you don’t remember our last few interactions. Allow me to remind you. Do you have the time to take a stroll down memory lane with me? It won’t be long; I already promised as much, and I *never* break a promise. No objections? Oh, *good.*”

Voldemort shifted in his seat, feigning thoughtfulness. “As I recall, you two were about to host another episode of the highly illegal broadcast you wittingly called *Potterwatch*… but I—along with Harry, one of your many brothers, and Bellatrix Lestrange, if we want to recall such details—came and so rudely interrupted and commandeered it. But I can let such bygones be bygones… That broadcast ultimately was a highly useful tool for me. It really took the wind of the resistance’s sails when they heard *my* voice.”

He leaned forward again. “And then, of course, there was your trial, where I so *mercifully* did not condemn you to Azkaban for the better part of your lives or *far* worse, as I could have, but an extraordinarily kind sentence serving at the Ministry of Magic. A sentence that had the advantage of giving you an enviable position within the newly reformed Ministry, one that could have easily led to serious and important roles after your two years of servitude. I essentially handed you a *job* for your rebellious acts, and yet…”

He lifted his wand, and a scroll of parchment materialized before him.

He unfurled it. “You are wrong, Mr. Weasley,” he said as he glanced at the writing there. “Sixteen. You have been written up by higher management no less than sixteen times already, for things as contrite as showing up late to your shifts and as serious as—and this one is my personal favorite—sexual harassment, when you devised an entirely new way to get Dolores Umbridge to finally request that you both be taken off her service.”

Harry couldn’t help it—a laugh escaped his lips. He covered his mouth at once in an attempt to stifle the sound, but everyone heard it. Fred and George gave him sheepish grins.

Harry had assumed Voldemort was removing them from her service himself as a small act of kindness to him, Harry… evidently, this was not the case. He could only imagine Fred and George being lewd and flirtatious enough towards Umbridge to make her so uncomfortable that she had to request to get rid of them. He wasn’t sure if the thought delighted or disgusted him.

Voldemort chose to ignore Harry’s laugh, and kept speaking as though it never occurred.

“Sixteen documented acts of misconduct… between you both, that is, but honestly—does anyone *ever* differentiate between the two of you?”

The Dark Lord rolled the parchment back up and tossed it lazily into the air behind him. It disappeared in a small puff of smoke. “Care to explain why you thought it would be wise to behave so recklessly? I’m curious to hear your thoughts.”

He folded his hands on his lap and waited. Voldemort’s magic was a terror to feel, and Harry was immediately sobered by it. Every instinct he had told him that he should run and take George and Fred with him… but of course that could not happen.

The twins clearly didn’t need to sense magic to also realize that this situation was dire.

“*Well*?”

Voldemort’s voice cracked like a whip, sudden and sharp in the silence. Fred and George both startled, and George stuttered out, “W-we were just… just having a laugh.”

“Yes, it wasn’t serious, it was all in good fun,” Fred added.

“Well, the sexual harassment wasn’t *that* fun,” George grumbled.

“Yeah, and honestly, I don’t think it *was* sexual harassment—I mean, we just watched how Shafiq treated all *his* lady interns and aimed similar behavior towards Umbridge—if anyone should be written up for sexual harassment, you outta look at several of your—”

“*Silence,*” Voldemort hissed, and Fred shut his mouth. “We aren’t here to discuss anyone else, are we? No, just the two of you and your need to, what was it? Have some good fun? A laugh?”

He tilted his head to one side. “I’ll tell you what,” Voldemort said. “I’ll give you the opportunity to change my mind. Demonstrate how important your work is. Do something amusing for me. Tell me a joke. Make me laugh, right now, and I’ll let you walk out of this courtroom with no further comments.”

He folded his hands on his lap again, the Deathstick still being held delicately between his fingers. The fact that he had not put it away was not lost on Harry, nor had it gone unnoticed by the twins, who chose to stare at it rather than the face of Lord Voldemort.

The Dark Lord was waiting. Fred and George looked at each other, then glanced at Harry like maybe he could tell them what they should do. Even if he could have spoken out of turn without some terrible repercussions, Harry had no advice for them. They all knew, despite Voldemort’s faux-patience, that there was no right thing they could do or say, and to even try would only make things worse. It would have been easier to convince a Veela that she was unattractive to all human men than it would have been to make Voldemort laugh.

A few tense seconds passed.

“Nothing?” Voldemort said, not bothering to act surprised. They didn’t say anything to that, either.

“Pity.”

Voldemort unfolded his hands and started tapping the Elder wand nonchalantly on his thigh. “You know what *I* think?” he said, his magic starting to glimmer with liveliness. Naturally, he didn’t expect them to say anything to that, either. “I think you two are *very* smart.”

They looked surprised at the compliment, their auras intertwining in a mass of nerves and confusion, but Voldemort only smirked.

“Oh, yes, I do. You two are unexpectedly brilliant, and you have been masters at side-stepping authority and *just* managing to get away with it for a long time. You were excellent at it at Hogwarts, spending the absolute bare minimum amount of time to pass your classes so that you could spend your time focusing on vastly more interesting pursuits, like exploring every hidden nook and cranny of the castle and inventing ways to transfigure students into canaries by eating a pastry. Truly, you have been done a great disservice. Typical education *bored* you. Your talents should have been seen for what they were much sooner and nourished accordingly, not allowed to be wasted on such useless pursuits as *joke shops*… ah, but I digress.”

He waved one hand flippantly—the one holding his ominous wand. “Yes, up until the moment you decided to *really* say goodbye to traditional education—and *what* a way to go—you were exceptionally good at knowing how far you could push your luck before you got into any real trouble. You learned exactly when and how you could charm your way out of some predicaments and how to altogether avoid others when you wanted—and when taking the detention was worth it, of course. Which was quite frequent.”

Fred and George shared another identical look, their brows raised and eyes wide.

“You shouldn’t be so surprised,” Voldemort continued. “I learned all about you two the moment I discovered your fun radio show… I always do my homework, boys, and I must admit, what I unearthed about you was *quite* interesting. You’re rebellious spirits, through and through, and so, *do you know what I think?”*

His faux-casual attitude was suddenly gone with his last words, and his voice turned lethal and dark.

“*I* think your every *amusing* act at the Ministry has been an intelligent, calculated risk, tiny acts of defiance that, until now, you were certain would fly under the radars of anyone *too* important, least of all mine. A grave error on your part, because I know *everything.”*

He stood, his black magic swelling around him. Harry was reminded of when Hermione had appeared to them in the foyer of Malfoy Manor, and he had begun to raise his voice at her, losing himself in his rage.

“*I* think that you have both gone *far* too long without real consequences, and it is high time that you end your rebellion and

accept the fact that *this* is the world now. There is no resistance left. This is *my* regime, *my* new order, and you *will* come to heel. And do you know what else *I think?"*

He tilted his head again, and the smile that spread there now was the most dangerous one Harry had seen yet.

"I think you are too similar," he said in a softer voice. He pointed his wand at one of them, then the other, causing them both to jump violently. "Honestly, you are so identical it's no wonder you are always lumped together. Aside from the gaping hole in the side of your head—oh, I don't mean that as an insult, George, I appreciate a bit of dark magic more than most—you're just so… alike. It's a problem. But you don't need to worry about that any longer. I have the perfect solution."

He pursed his lips, the started to go back and forth with his wand again, pointing at Fred, then George, then Fred again, and—Harry was sure he was imagining it—but was he *humming to the tune of eeny, meeny, miney, moe?*

He eventually stopped with his wand aimed at Fred, who turned as white as fresh snow. Voldemort's grin became downright demonic.

There was a sudden flash of magic, and before Harry could even shout in surprise, Fred was there, *right there,* having been dragged through the air so that he was directly in front of the Dark Lord on the raised platform, down on his knees with one arm jutted forward, being held by his wrist with Voldemort's other hand, his forearm exposed.

"*Morsmordre*."

"Fred, no, *no*—!"

Voldemort didn't relinquish his hold on Fred when George shouted and ran forward. He didn't move his wand from Fred's forearm, he didn't so much as flick his wrist in his direction—he just *looked* at George, and a blast of dark magic struck him in the chest, sending his sprawling backwards with such force that he flew into the wall at the far side of the courtroom. He fell to his side and Harry could only assume he made some horrible, whimpering sound, but he couldn't tell.

He couldn't hear anything over the sound of Fred's scream.

Fred *wailed* as Voldemort branded him with the Dark Mark, and Harry

could do nothing but watch on mute horror beside him, paralyzed with shock.

Voldemort lifted the curse a moment later and released Fred's wrist. Fred slumped to the ground in front of him, clutching his forearm, which Harry was certain was burning in agony.

The Dark Mark was deep black against his pale, freckled skin.

"That's much better," Voldemort murmured. He flicked the Deathstick at Fred, and he too flew backwards, landing on the ground in the middle of the courtroom. Much further back George was groaning, trying and failing to push himself up from the floor. Harry could tell by his magic that he was not too damaged, however… and he was much better off than his brother, whose aura was nearly colorless with horror at what had just happened to him.

"You'd best fall in line immediately, *Death Eater*, or the hole in your twin's head will be the very least of his disfigurements," Voldemort hissed. "Now go gather him and get out of my sight… until I summon you, of course, which I promise will be *very* soon."

He pointed his wand at the door, which flung open. Fred didn't wait for further instructions. He yanked the sleeve of his robe down to cover the marking, rushed over to George, and even though he was quivering, helped him to stand. He had just made it to the doorway with his brother hauled under his arm when Voldemort called out, "Ah. One more thing."

Fred froze, his already pale magic becoming even more fearful. He turned.

Voldemort pulled something out from one of his inner robe pockets. "This belongs to you."

He tossed him a wand. *Fred's* wand, it seemed. His eyes went comically wide as it landed on the floor in front of him, clattering with a dull sound before rolling closer to him. Fred reached down for it, and if there was any question as to whether or not it was his, it was answered a second later when the wand jumped a few inches from the floor into his outstretched hand. Harry felt Fred's magic flare with life for a moment, and as he held it up high, a real smile spread across his face.

It fell a moment later when he glanced at Voldemort, like he was wondering if this was *his* idea of a joke.

“Death Eaters get wands,” Voldemort said simply.

Fred looked as though he’d met his threshold. Without saying anything else, and after casting Harry the briefest glance of terrorized bewilderment, he hauled his still-disoriented twin out of the courtroom. The door closed again once they were gone.

Voldemort heaved a great, theatrical sigh and looked at Harry. “I sincerely hope I don’t have to brand any more of your friends, Harry. It is… exhausting.”

He touched Harry’s face with one hand, trailing his fingers down his cheek. “So… Are you more or less upset with me than when we started?”

Harry stared, genuinely unsure. He was still mildly numb with shock, though his heart was racing and he was white-knuckling the bottom of the chair he was in. He took a deep breath and tried to consider him, but it was hard to focus. He wasn’t even sure what shocked him the most; Bellatrix being forced to vow deference to him or Fred being branded but not George. Maybe it was that Voldemort had hummed a sing-song melody before choosing Fred as though it was random, even though it couldn’t have been, because he’d intentionally brought Fred’s wand with him.

Harry shook his head slowly. “I don’t know,” he murmured. “I… did you *have* to make him a Death Eater?”

“Of course not,” Voldemort said, his magic gleaming. “But I *wanted* to.”

Voldemort cupped his face with both hands. “I know how *I* feel,” he said, as though Harry had asked. “I am very pleased. You didn’t even attempt to interfere.”

Harry blinked. He flexed his hands under his chair, then released his death grip on it. “To be fair, you did that all… well, it was really fast. I didn’t get much of a chance to do anything stupid.”

“That was intentional, on my part,” Voldemort murmured. “I suppose we are both learning.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed at his cocky expression. *Ah,* he realized, the shock quickly wearing off. He, Harry, was still *mad*.

“Are you now?” He patted one of Voldemort’s hands that was resting

against his face. “Wow. You’re such a good boy.”

Voldemort’s magic twitched and glinted. His expression cracked.

There was another, freakishly fast bit of magic. Harry’s world blurred, and the next thing he knew he was being slammed downwards—but he didn’t land on the ground. No, Harry was forced into the chair in the center of the chamber, the one with the terrible, cursed chains, and the moment his arse hit the seat they sprung to life and ensnared him, trapping him there.

Voldemort was standing before him. His magic was a whirlwind of powerful emotions.

“Congratulations, Harry,” he said softly. He started to prowl around him. “You’ve managed to overstep yourself in the face of my mercy *yet again…”*

Harry fought against his restraints, which, of course, did not yield. He could have kicked himself. Gods, *why* did he always have to say such stupid things? It nearly always ended in some variation of this situation.

Voldemort laughed at the way Harry rattled the chains. “What a shame,” he murmured, speaking into his ear from behind, “that now I have to punish *you*.”

Chapter End Notes

fanart by sarazureph

Courtroom Ten

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Voldemort's footsteps were slow as he continued to circle him. Harry felt his magic writhing, that sheen of black that glinted with gold—a glimmer that felt entirely too hostile at the moment. Harry struggled against the chains again, but this time they flared white-hot as they tightened around him, making him hiss in pain.

Voldemort's favorite thing, Harry thought venomously. *Prowling around a defenseless Harry Potter like some kind of sick predator.*

"What—?"

He only managed to get one word out before one of the chains clenched around his throat, just as it had when he was on trial. It loosened a moment later, and Harry fell forward once it did. He gasped and inhaled a shuddering breath.

Voldemort's magic was undulating as he continued walking, dark with a few emotions that Harry could decipher easily: anger, naturally, but alongside it was a substantial amount of *want.*

He stopped in front of him. Harry kept his head bowed, choosing to keep his eyes fixed on his feet rather than look at Voldemort's face. He took a few more labored breaths, and then a strange but unstoppable laugh bubbled out of his chest. And then another. And then Harry was sitting there, laughing much too hard, leaning as far forward as the chains would allow him, and maybe it was a good thing, too, because if he wasn't being held in place he surely would have fallen out of the cursed chair.

Voldemort's magic became much angrier.

"*Why* are you laughing?"

Harry's vision was blurred with the tears that had gathered in the corners of his eyes (though whether they had come from the pain of the cursed chains or his delirious laughter, he was unsure), and he *tried* to answer him, he did—but Harry couldn't. He took one look at the Dark Lord's royally pissed face and started laughing again.

Voldemort did not enjoy that reaction. He grabbed Harry's chin and a searing pain shot through his scar, a pain that made the burning from the chains seem mild in comparison. Harry's laughs turned to screams

A sound that was much more in line with what Voldemort expected. It stopped, and Harry did, too—screaming, laughing, and everything else.

"Do you find that there is something amusing about the situation you find yourself in, Harry?" Voldemort asked, his nails digging into Harry's face.

Harry grinned. It was a small miracle that he didn't start laughing again. "Yeah, actually," he said, to Voldemort's visible ire. "Pretty much all of it is amusing. I feel like I'm on the world's most fucked up merry-go-round. You might even agree. Feels like we've been here before, haven't we? Just replace these chains with the ones in the Malfoy dungeon, or turn them into glowing red snakes. Replace this ominous atmosphere with a creepy cave or some scary, dark woods. I wouldn't be surprised if you'd actually *planned* this entire situation despite everything you said, because, well, let's be honest. *This* chair? After my mock trial?"

Harry let out another short laugh. The chain around his throat tightened a hair, but not enough to cut off his breathing again. "I believe you said you'd never seen anyone move so quickly," he murmured. "That my magic was *divine.* And when I said I hated you, what was it you said?"

Harry waited. Voldemort looked torn, like half of him wanted to not say anything at all and kiss him violently instead, but his newly found devotion to prove he could practice restraint—or perhaps simple curiosity—won out.

"…That you do so beautifully," he responded after a pause. His eyes went to Harry's curved lips. He leaned in closer.

"Gosh, I wonder what's going to happen next?" Harry said. Voldemort's lips grazed his, a featherlight kiss that could not have been more different than his aura, which was suffocatingly heavy with lust. "You're pretty predictable."

He didn't think that comment would garner such a strong reaction. Voldemort tensed at once, leaning away from Harry and looking almost as offended as when Harry had once implied that he was ugly.

"*Predictable?"*

"Er," Harry started, the sudden anger catching him off guard. "Uh… yeah?"

Voldemort's eyes flashed a dangerously bright red, his magic full of emotion. *Deeply offended.* "I see," he said quietly.

He released his hold on Harry's face and stood to his full height, looking down at him with such cold fury that Harry was reeling and, admittedly, a bit frightened again.

Voldemort did not like being predictable.

Noted, Harry thought weakly as Voldemort took another step back. His magic was swelling venomously.

"Then you shouldn't be surprised in the slightest, should you, at what happens next?"

Harry closed his eyes and braced himself, certain that another onslaught of pain was coming his way.

He tensed. He held his breath and waited.

Nothing happened.

He felt Voldemort's magic move behind him, and he prepared himself for some kind of horrible curse to strike him from behind.

Nothing.

Another heartbeat passed, and Harry heard swift and purposeful footsteps. He hesitantly opened his eyes, but before he could look over his shoulder he heard a thundering *slam* that was, unmistakably, the sound of a closing door.

Harry gasped and looked behind him as well as he could while chained.

Voldemort was gone.

No, Harry thought. He pulled against the chains again, but they did not relinquish him.

He was trapped in Courtroom Ten.

“HEY!” Harry shouted, struggling. “YOU CAN’T JUST LEAVE ME IN HERE!”

Except he obviously could, because he had. Harry’s echoing voice faded quickly enough, leaving him in absolute, eerie silence.

He couldn’t stand it for long. “COME BACK, YOU BASTARD!” Harry roared—which was, admittedly, probably the wrong thing to shout if getting the proud Lord Voldemort to return was his goal, but he was mad, and logic and blind rage rarely went hand in hand. “GET BACK HERE OR—AAAAAHH—!”

Evidently, the chains realized he had some violent intentions before Harry himself did. They burned suddenly twice as badly, and then the one on his throat constricted again, cutting his scream off.

Harry coughed when it loosened on his neck, once more allowing him the privilege of breathing. He glowered at them. “Why can’t you be on my side,” he muttered as though they were reasonable, sentient beings. Which they weren’t, of course, and so they did not respond.

Except they do respond, Harry recalled. *They monitor emotion and respond accordingly… So… if I calm down, they should let me go… right?*

He could do that. He could calm down enough that these stupid chains would no longer think he was a threat. Then he would be able to reach his wand, and even though he suspected that the Dark Lord had locked him in here using some magic that was above him, Harry was sure he could figure *something* out.

He scowled. How could Voldemort just leave him in here when he’d hardly done anything *bad* at all, just made a stupid remark? And really, was that so horrible, considering that Voldemort had *just* branded Fred? Because that was another thing he liked to do, wasn’t it—mark and mutilate the people Harry cared about, the fucking arse; and worst of all was that what he said before he abandoned him was *right,* Harry shouldn’t have been surprised *at all* that Voldemort would just leave him alone and in chains because that was something he *loved* to do at pretty much every opportunity he could, that twisted, *horrible—*

“AHHH—*fuck!”*

Harry swore and thrashed when the chains burned hotter again, sensing his building rage.

Right, he thought when they stopped. *Calm down. I need to calm down. I need to… empty my mind.*

Harry thought suddenly of the ring in his pocket. Would the ghost of Severus Snape, former Occlumency instructor and expert at this sort of thing, be helpful at this moment? Harry considered it, then cast the thought aside immediately. Even if he could reach the ring—which he couldn't, as his arms were bound tightly to the chair—he didn't think Snape would be exactly… pleased with him. Hell, he'd probably sneer at him and give him a condescending look and say things like *I advised you to be respectful, did I not, Potter?* and *It's your own fault you're in this predicament* and *You're as rash and stupid as your father was before you.* And while Harry could not argue that such statements were untrue, they were also not constructive.

(Unless, of course, Snape decided to never assist him again at all, something Harry wouldn't be surprised by considering that he knew everything Harry knew, which meant he knew Harry had recently had a lot of really problematic, masochistic, and disastrously pleasurable sex with his former master, which… wasn't great, and made Harry die a little inside with shame.)

Harry groaned. He may never try to summon Snape again himself, because *that* conversation would be too much to bear.

He would much prefer to be able to reach his wand, but that was in a different pocket that was just as unreachable. There was a chain around each of his wrists, two more around each of his ankles, and another wrapped around his neck. He supposed he was lucky that there were not more around his chest and waist; that would have made being stuck even more uncomfortable.

After a few forced, even breaths, Harry felt the chains all loosen a bit more. *Good,* he thought. He managed a few more slow inhales and exhales. He started counting in his head to distract himself.

One… two… three… four…

He felt a slight prickle in his scar before he could think *five*.

A feeling of smugness and amusement flashed across his mind, and it was gone a second later. Harry, knowing what it was, chased after it with some intentional thoughts of his own, but it was like running his hands through smoke in an attempt to catch the fire that had already been put out.

Voldemort's Occlumency walls were firmly back in place.

Harry howled with a renewed—and unwise—sense of rage. Voldemort had just mentally *checked in* to make sure Harry was just as he'd left him, allowed Harry to feel how supremely smug he was about it all, then blocked him out again. Harry yelled much louder when the chains once more tightened, but he couldn't help it.

It's so fucking unfair!

It *was!* Someone like Snape would mock him for thinking things like that, because yes, life wasn't fair and everything sucked and wallowing in pity wasn't going to help, but sometimes Harry wanted to drown in such thoughts. It *wasn't* fair, him being in the position he was in, where Voldemort had infinitely more control over the connection between them, and—

Harry froze. The chains reacted accordingly when he stopped fighting, loosening. Harry tilted his head back as far as the one wrapped around his neck would allow, stared up at the tall, dark ceiling of the courtroom, and pondered.

Did Voldemort have infinitely more control? Did he still?

Harry blinked. Slowly, he smiled.

No, he remembered, and it was far from their first time he had. *No, he does not.*

Harry knew—or should have known—better by now, but he was always so quick to forget, too easily swept into the pattern of being the captive, the victim, the poor tragic boy that Voldemort had so carefully portrayed him as the last time he'd been chained to this chair. But all of that was a fabricated web the Dark Lord had woven, and it was high time Harry cemented that in his mind.

Yes, Voldemort *was* far more experienced and adept at mental magic, and sure, he was a much more skilled wizard in general… but Harry had learned that, when it came to the connection between them, he *also* harbored a great deal of power.

That was why the Dark Lord had forced an armistice between them. He couldn't have Harry igniting that seductive light whenever he felt like it. Harry hadn't really thought about just how much mayhem he could cause with that ability alone, but it was probably… a lot. He could likely reduce Voldemort to something pretty pitiful for a while,

if he really wanted. The repercussions would be dire, certainly, but the fact that he *could* do it had made Voldemort wary enough to strike bargains with Harry as though he were *almost* an equal.

So, that was an option, Harry realized. He *could* tap into that connection right now, or try to anyway, and even if it was a much weaker pull due to distance, he was certain Voldemort would not be able to resist coming back at the promise of it…

But then I would be the one breaking the pact, and I'd earn a Dark Mark of my own. Harry grimaced. As bad as he felt for Hermione and Fred, he really didn't feel like joining them as a fellow Death Eater. He had enough scars courtesy of Lord Voldemort, and if the one meeting he'd been dragged to had been anything to go by, he'd rather not frequent them.

Besides. He wanted to win this silent war between himself and the Dark Lord.

He wanted his eyes back.

So breaking that vow was *not* an option, then… however.

Harry's grin became a little more crooked as a new plan began to unfold in his mind. He would not use the bond between their souls, but that wasn't all there was. There was a mental element to their connection as well; Voldemort abused it all the time. He purposefully checked in on Harry whenever he pleased, only to shut Harry out so he couldn't do the same.

However.

It *did* work in reverse and Harry knew it did because Voldemort had said as much himself! Just before they came to the Ministry he referenced it, yelling at Harry for having so many angry emotions that kept flickering in and out of his mind all night… and what was it he had said, once?

Do you know how your heart haunts me?

Harry *was* able to breach Voldemort's mind, and he *had* been all along… he'd just been doing it unwittingly and unintentionally, and he'd been too fucking stupid to realize that he could *try* to be intentional about it from time to time.

Well, that's being a bit harsh on myself, Harry thought. He obviously *had*

tried to reach Voldemort through their mental connection, he'd just been going about it all wrong. Simply having loud, demanding thoughts was not enough.

It was Harry's *emotions* that got the Dark Lord's unwavering attention, whether he liked it or not. And that made sense, really, because it had always been Voldemort's powerful emotions that he, Harry, would feel before either of them were aware that he was a horcrux… Voldemort's anger when he was disappointed, his joy when his Death Eaters were broken out of Azkaban…

Emotions. Powerful emotions were the key.

Which led Harry to this moment, here. What powerful feelings could he conjure up that would make Voldemort return? What feelings could he have that would bother him enough that he would feel compelled to come back?

Well, copious amounts of anger were easy enough, but Voldemort was expecting those. Counting on them, in fact. He was all wounded at being called predictable, the sodding drama queen. He *wanted* Harry to suffer for a while as a punishment; he'd be disappointed if he *didn't* sense a great deal of rage from his human horcrux.

There was always sorrow, Harry mused. He doubted he was ever too many steps away from falling into a deep state of despair, but that might work *too* well. Harry didn't really love the idea of Voldemort sensing a deeply unhappy Harry, because an unhappy Harry had a history of leading to a suicidal Harry, and if Voldemort's hold on him was tight now…

He would never let me out of his sight again, Harry lamented. It didn't matter that Harry didn't want to kill himself anymore—if he died now, Voldemort would probably blame everyone else and go on a killing spree, murdering anyone in sight. At least, that seemed like how a Dark Lord would grieve.

Okay… no wallowing in sorrow.

Which was fine, Harry thought. He had a better idea, anyway.

Feeling a thrill of adrenaline at his daring, Harry closed his eyes… and imagined.

He imagined Voldemort back in the courtroom, standing over him, looming in all his dark and terrible glory. He imagined him coming

closer, leaning down, letting his fingers trace his jaw before ghosting over the chain that held his neck…

Harry's heart sped as he pictured it. He could envision it almost too well–Voldemort's hands on his chest, his fingers burning the fabric away like his touch was as hot as those red-hot snakes had been when he was held in Malfoy Manor… That nightmare felt like a lifetime ago, but Harry could recall the way those cursed snakes hissed, repeating over and over the same words…

Hold him… hold him… hold him…

The chains—the real chains attached to the cursed chair—didn't seem to know what to make of Harry's current… emotions. They rattled and twisted slightly, not loosening but not growing tighter, either.

Harry imagined that Voldemort would like that, if he were there. He could imagine his smirk perfectly, could feel the way his magic would glimmer in delight…

Feeling a rush at simply *imagining* it, Harry's heart sped faster as he pictured Voldemort lowering himself, *kneeling* before him, pushing his knees apart as far as he could on the cursed chair where his ankles were bound…

In his mind, Voldemort was burning away the fabric that separated him from what he really wanted to run his hands along… He imagined himself completely bare as a grinning Dark Lord began to place kisses along his inner thighs, inching closer, so eager to wrap his lips around Harry's hardening, exposed…

Harry hummed as though he'd really done it, as though Voldemort was actually there, tongue lashing, his hot, wet mouth moving up, then down…

The chains moved again, making Harry once more envision snakes. Maybe it was because he was picturing them so well, but for some reason, Harry found himself hissing out loud.

"*Yes,*" he said, speaking in parseltongue. And then, because he knew that if this didn't get Voldemort's attention, nothing would:

"Please… master."

His scar prickled, then burned.

Then it burned a *lot.*

Harry let out a yelp of pain. He wasn't surprised when he felt Voldemort—who probably hadn't gone all that far, Harry realized, because he was back *really* quickly—storm into the courtroom, the door slamming shut behind him a second later.

His face was furious. His magic was… also furious, but even more conflicted and lustful than it had been before.

Harry grinned. "Forget something?"

Voldemort stalked closer, his furious face becoming ever more deadly, his magic darkening and swelling in perilous ways. "You say you feel like *you're* on the world's most fucked up merry-go-round, Harry?" he seethed. "You are the one who continues to play this very stupid, very dangerous game with me…"

He stood directly over Harry again, his magic surrounding him in that possessive, suffocating way.

"I have no idea what you mean," Harry said. "I'm just trying to not get left behind in a courtroom."

"You know exactly what you're doing. You should be much more careful, Harry… if you keep playing stupid games with Lord Voldemort, you might be surprised at what happens."

"I have a vague idea of what will happen," Harry responded, almost laughing again. "More of the same, probably."

Voldemort leaned down so that his eyes were level with Harry's. "No, Harry," he murmured. His hostile face softened. "Keep playing like this with *me*… and you might win."

Harry blinked, entirely surprised. Also confused. "W…win?"

"Win," Voldemort repeated. He looked at Harry's shocked face and his eyes narrowed angrily. "And how would that make you feel, Harry? To know that you have the most powerful sorcerer in the world at your beck and call? To know that, with a few *imaginative* thoughts, I would come running to you, night or day? To have *me* on a leash… Do you think you could keep hold of it? I am *very* strong."

He held Harry's face in his hands, unnervingly gently. "How would you feel, knowing you have the heart of a *fucking* monster in your

keeping?"

Harry stared, eyes wide with shock. This… was not going at all like he thought it would.

Voldemort waited. His crimson eyes were bright, piercing, expectant. His magic was coiling in dark and twisted ways, and while there was quite a lot going on there to unpack, Harry could feel a great deal of loathing.

Self-loathing. Harry was shocked at the strength of it. Gods, he had really dealt a blow to this man's ego when he'd called him that, hadn't he? Even now, a whole new, undeniably beautiful body later, and Voldemort was *still* reeling over that insult.

You're a fucking *monster*…

Which was astonishing, wasn't it? Why did he care so much what Harry thought of him?

He wasn't sure, but Harry knew it was true, and had been for a while. Voldemort's pride blew up like a fucking balloon when Harry praised him, and when he insulted him—even a little—he took it… badly.

Harry didn't know what to say, regarding his series of shocking questions. How *did* he feel about that?

The heart of a fucking monster… of *Lord Voldemort*… in his keeping…?

Did he even mean those words or what they implied, or were they all questions he asked to throw Harry off? To confuse and to ultimately manipulate him?

It was so frustrating, to never be sure.

It was also frustrating that the bit about having Voldemort on a leash —who was *very* strong—made Harry's stomach do things that he would rather not admit.

"I…" he started. He swallowed hard, then tried again. "I… don't know."

Voldemort glared. His self-loathing grew darker. He lowered his hands, scoffed, then stood. "Then you had best not assault me with such thoughts again. Or the next time you address me as *master*, you

will *mean* it."

He waved his hand, and the chains on Harry's limbs all released him and fell to the ground. Harry felt his magic surge with power; he hadn't realized how badly it had been repressed in the chair.

He hadn't even gotten to his feet yet when Voldemort was already briskly making his exit, leaving the courtroom as angrily as he had returned.

"Wait!" Harry shouted. "Hold on."

Voldemort's magic twitched. He could not have looked more pissed off when he turned to look at him. "*What?*" he snarled. "You're free. Or do you need assistance finding your way out of the Ministry of Magic? If memory serves, you're very experienced at breaking into *and* escaping this place."

Harry ignored that comment and all the memories that accompanied it, rushing over to him as he spoke. "You can't just—just spring loaded, really confusing questions like that on me."

Voldemort laughed darkly. He didn't otherwise respond, just turned to leave again.

"Okay—I know that's sort of hypocritical, considering what I just sprung on you," Harry went on, and Voldemort paused, listening, albeit clearly agitated at himself that he was, "but you can't be that pissed about it. It was a dirty trick, sure, but—but you're like, ninety percent dirty tricks!"

Voldemort looked offended all over again. "Do not compare what I do with what you do, Harry," he drawled. "I am the Dark Lord. My moves are calculated, cunning, and vastly more sophisticated than anything you have *ever* done."

"*Really?"* Harry said. "Leaving me chained to a cursed chair, alone in a courtroom because you got all upset—at a comment that you make to me all the time, no less—doesn't scream *calculated, cunning,* or *vastly sophisticated* to me."

Voldemort's face remained impressively still, but Harry sensed the jolt of embarrassment in his magic that told Harry he was right. That had not been a calculated move; it had been an in-the-heat-of-moment, Harry-Potter-makes-me-so-angry move.

“And what does it scream, Harry?” Voldemort asked.

“…I feel like any answer I give to that question is going to be the wrong one.”

Voldemort scoffed. “Is there something you actually *want,* now? You succeeded in getting me to come back sooner than I would have, because *yes,* those thoughts would have been *highly* distracting and I prefer to use my time doing things that require my full, undivided attention. Congratulations; perhaps you should have listened to the Sorting Hat and been placed in Slytherin house after all.”

He paused to relish the affronted look on Harry’s face. “I’ve released you,” he continued. “Our business is done, for now. You are free to return to your friends.”

“Er. Yes. I mean, no, no it’s not.” Harry took a deep breath, then said, “I would like… er… permission.”

“Permission for *what?”*

“Not—not what I was—for, you know… our… other thing,” Harry said awkwardly. “I think… I think you could use it. It’s been more than a day, right? Things were better, I thought, for you, when you had… that… every night… at m-midnight… er…”

Harry trailed off at the way Voldemort’s magic was quickly growing dark and ominous, but he knew he was right. The Dark Lord was getting… antsy, as far as Harry could tell. He could probably use some quality horcrux time—as well as a fucking nap, in Harry’s opinion, but he could only do so much.

“I mean,” Harry said, realizing too late that he had, as usual, gone about this all wrong, “*I* would like that. Me. Me, Harry, *I* am the one who would like that, if, er… you would be so—*ah!*”

Voldemort’s magic lashed out at Harry’s horrible attempt at acting, making a gust of cold wind stir the air and the dim lights in the courtroom flicker. “I’m sorry!” Harry yelled. “I’m full of shit, obviously—*not* a great liar, *not* a cunning Slytherin—but it’s true! So… permission?”

Voldemort looked like he wanted to say that he didn’t want, need, or crave *anything* Harry had to offer at all. But that would be a great lie, and it was evident in his contorted face and his magic that he wanted *everything* Harry had to offer. He wanted to say no, he really did… but

he couldn't.

Voldemort nodded stiffly.

"O… okay," Harry said.

Voldemort didn't move. Harry felt intensely uncomfortable, being the one to initiate it, but he did. He took Voldemort's hand, and as softly as he could, he called forth the light.

He was relieved that he was able to control it as well as he could. That buoyancy bloomed between them, peace with a touch. Voldemort's cloud of distraught emotions cleared, and his rage-filled face relaxed. His whole body went lax as well, and he moved, seemingly unintentionally, until he had Harry fully in his grasp, one arm encircling his waist while the other kept hold of his hand, his head bowed so their foreheads touched. He closed his eyes and sighed softly as the feeling of Harry's soul washed over him.

It was… good, when it was like this, Harry thought. With him, the one with an unbroken soul, controlling things. When Voldemort kept his composure and didn't take more than was being offered.

Harry closed his eyes too, happy to forget absolutely everything for a moment and just bask in the impossible feeling of it. Everything was soft, warm, and light.

Harry wasn't sure how long it went on—he never really was—when he finally looked up and spoke.

"Powerful," he murmured.

Voldemort opened his eyes slightly to meet his gaze, a curious gleam in his magic.

"The answer to your questions," Harry explained. He felt a wave of heat rising to his face, but he forced himself to finish. "It would make me feel… powerful."

Harry wasn't sure if Voldemort was pleased with that answer or not. He merely looked at Harry for a long time, his red eyes dark and his magic glistening.

Harry was certain his face had become brilliantly red. He waited for some kind of reaction, his heart pounding. Was that offensive, too? Was he incapable of saying the right thing, ever?

Voldemort finally moved, lifting his chin so that their lips were closer together. “Permission?” he murmured.

“To do what? You already have… er. You know. This.”

The warmth between them grew a little hotter, at Harry’s hand. He felt *very* powerful when Voldemort’s whole body leaned into him more, craving it and helpless to resist.

“Unless—unless it’s not enough,” Harry added, becoming anxious.

“It’s never enough,” Voldemort said. “But no… I am not asking for permission to feast on your gorgeous soul until you collapse… though it is always *so* tempting.”

There was a sudden, jarring increase in that buoyant light, and a familiar black cloud of toxic want surfaced, crawling over Harry’s skin —but it was gone in a moment, and the light between them returned to its much more bearable warmth.

Voldemort’s hold on Harry’s hand had become rigidly tight. Harry got the sense that he hadn’t meant to do that.

“…Not that,” Voldemort said in a hoarse whisper. “To kiss you.”

Harry’s heart was racing. “Just… that?”

“No.”

Voldemort moved his face even closer; his lips ghosting over Harry’s when he continued speaking. The light between them stayed steady and calm.

“To kiss you, first here…”

He released his hold on Harry’s waist to touch his bottom lip with his thumb.

“Then here.”

His hand slid to his neck.

“Then here…”

His fingers moved down his chest, along his stomach…

“Then here, and here…”

His palm went to rest on his upper inner thigh, and Harry felt like all the blood in his body had followed the path made by his hand, pooling there and making him stiffen. Voldemort ran his fingers along the length of him, smirking when Harry's breath hitched in response.

"And maybe here, if you're *good*."

Harry didn't have the brain power to know what that meant, but he didn't care. He nodded stupidly.

Voldemort grinned, then pressed his lips to Harry's.

His kiss was slow, the kind of kiss that Harry hated most because of how much he loved it. Voldemort's lips were soft and his bite was gentle when he caught Harry's lower lip between his teeth. The light between them thrummed, a pulsing of magic that made Harry feel like he could touch the sky itself.

It shouldn't have been allowed, for kissing alone to feel so good.

But it did, it always did, and Voldemort didn't seem to be in any hurry now that he'd finally decided that he was going to act out *someone's* fantasy, Harry was sure. He slid his tongue into Harry's mouth, one of his hands finding its way into his hair while the other wrapped around his waist again. He was slow, deep, and tender. Harry's body reacted on its own, one arm wrapping around his neck so he could pull himself closer and the other—what was he doing? He really was growing bold—was pushing open his robes, sliding down his waist, going towards—

Harry's fingers happened upon something hard. Very hard. Inhumanly hard. He felt a flash like static electricity when he came into contact with it. Unthinking, still lost in the Dark Lord's whirlwind kiss, he gripped it.

The light between them vanished.

Voldemort's hand was on his wrist, holding it in an ironclad grip where it was. His magic turned a fierce shade of red-black and he broke their kiss with a violent jerk. He kept his other arm on Harry's waist and held him painfully tight, then spoke in a deadly voice in his ear.

"*My wand, Harry?"*

Harry immediately let go of what was now *obviously* the handle of the

fucking Elder Wand, but Voldemort wouldn't let him move his arm. "I d-didn't mean t-to," Harry stuttered out, dread rushing through him. "I w-wasn't, *that* wasn't—"

"How much of a fool do you take me for?" Voldemort seethed. "Has this been a plan of yours all along? Have you been waiting for the right moment, a time like right now, when my defenses are lowered, when I am focused solely, entirely, *foolishly* on *you,* so that—"

"No, no, NO!"

Harry had to yell his refusal, anything to interrupt that train of thought. "No, I wasn't—you really think I'm that stupid? To nick the Deathstick out of your pocket during—during—something like this! Why would I do that? Not even *I'm* that reckless!"

Harry sucked in a breath, feeling slightly less terrified when Voldemort's aura softened a bit as he listened. "I'm just… someone who happens to do really stupid things by accident sometimes."

Voldemort continued to look incensed, but his magic was calming more and more.

"Sorry," Harry added. "I really didn't mean to. I was just—I mean, you know, I wasn't… going… for that."

The silence that followed this statement was heavy enough and Harry's face was hot enough that he felt like he might melt into a puddle on the floor. Voldemort's grip really was starting to hurt.

"C-can I have my wrist back?" Harry asked weakly.

"No."

Harry was yanked forward as Voldemort moved, dragging Harry along with him. He was not surprised to find himself thrust back into the cursed chair, Voldemort's hand replaced with the familiar chains he had only recently escaped from. They snapped around his other limbs, too, though they left his throat alone this time.

"It's a shame you couldn't have been *good,* Harry," Voldemort purred. He pulled the Elder Wand from the pocket it had been stored in, which *was* close to where Harry had been trying to reach, but that didn't seem to matter any longer.

"I could have been *nice."*

He whipped the wand in Harry's direction, and the chains became much tighter, and heavier feeling, too. Harry felt like a weight had been set in his chest. Voldemort smirked and pocketed the Deathstick.

"What was it you had been imagining again, Harry?" Voldemort moved closer, his shadow falling over him. *Round and round and round,* Harry thought, a bit hysterically.

"I think it went something like *this."*

Harry knew this couldn't end well, but he was transfixed watching Voldemort as he raked his hands down his chest, onto his legs… he gasped when the Dark Lord performed the exact kind of magic he had imagined in real life, no Deathstick necessary, his hands suddenly burning hot as the fabric of his clothes burned and melted away. It singed his skin, too, which *hurt,* but they both knew he would heal in moments.

Voldemort *did* kneel, dragging his scorching nails along his thighs and tearing the fringed fabric away in a manner that was much more violent than what Harry had imagined. His hands stopped burning as he pushed Harry's knees apart. His magic was heavy with lust; when he looked up at Harry's face, there was dark intent in his eyes.

"And then what happened, Harry?"

"I *wasn't* trying to steal your wand," Harry said in a rush, because it felt *really* important that he know that. "I wasn't, I *wouldn't."*

"I think I did this," Voldemort said, ignoring him. He dragged his tongue along Harry's thigh, then brought his lips to the tip of his length. "Didn't I?"

He let out a low laugh when Harry surely looked deeply afraid… but his body was also betraying him. His cock was swelling, embarrassingly quickly.

"This is what you wanted, isn't it?"

Harry felt the warmth of Voldemort's breath on his sensitive skin when he spoke. He ran his tongue over his tip, making Harry instantly whimper and throw his head back as he became fully hard.

"You'll have to tell me, Harry," Voldemort said, still speaking with his mouth against him. "I forget exactly how it went, in your head. What was it you said?"

Before Harry could respond, he did it—Voldemort's mouth was around him, hot and wet and *so good.* Harry may not have believed it was really happening, because *how could this be really happening,* but not even his wildest imagination could ever feel like this.

"Uuunggh," Harry groaned ineloquently. He had his eyes squeezed shut with his head tilted back, and when Voldemort moved his mouth lower, taking in more of him, he bucked his hips and moaned louder.

Voldemort's magic was glimmering in a way that told Harry he was enjoying this too much. He moved his tongue up and down, wrapping it around Harry's cock in a way he wouldn't have thought possible.

You're going to need to use your words, Harry, Voldemort's voice hissed in his mind, alerting Harry that everything was very *open* now, and his thoughts were definitely no longer private. *What did you say?*

Harry's head was swimming, and it was almost impossible to focus on anything when he was doing that with his tongue, and—*oh*—

Voldemort stopped, lifting his mouth, and the sudden cold of the air was jolting.

"I'm waiting," Voldemort murmured, once more allowing Harry to feel every hot breath as he spoke against his now wet skin.

"Ah—I…"

"*Look."*

Without hesitating, before he even registered what the command was, Harry did. His heart skipped several beats at the sight.

Lord Voldemort, all pale skin and high cheekbones and sinfully full lips, on his knees in front of him, between his thighs which were only partly covered by some remaining singed, burnt fabric… Harry's cock was completely exposed, hard and, to his embarrassment, *leaking,* already on the verge of coming. Voldemort's magic was mind-numbingly beautiful *and* terrifying, a sheet of oppressive black with flecks of gold that glinted sharply.

His pupils were blown wide, but that rim of red was brilliant and bloody.

It was the stuff of nightmares, this image, yet Harry felt and *saw* his whole body turning red with flushing heat, especially the raw skin on

his chest and legs that had mended from the burns Voldemort had inflicted upon him.

Voldemort gave him a small, cruel smile. “I’m waiting.”

He briefly lapped his tongue along Harry's length, making Harry suck in a sharp breath. “*Speak,”* he hissed afterwards.

“Uh—I… s-said… y-yes…”

Voldemort’s eyes narrowed and his smile became crueler. “Wrong.” He licked the other side of his cock, purposefully leaving his leaking head untouched. “Try again.”

“Ahh…uh.” Harry knew what he meant but struggled to do it. Speaking in Parseltongue didn't always come easily to him; he had to imagine snakes, usually…

“*Speak,”* Voldemort commanded.

Was it because he had spoken in Parseltongue himself, and that made it easier to reply in like? Or was it because it was one of those commands that Harry seemed to feel in his soul, like when Voldemort commanded he do certain things like sleep? Harry wasn’t sure, all he knew was that he instantly replied with a sibilant, *“Yes.”*

Voldemort smiled wider and his magic shone. He engulfed him again, keeping his eyes locked on Harry’s, and that was it—there was no stopping it, Harry was immediately going to—

Except he didn’t. Voldemort lifted his lips a few horrifically short seconds later, leaving Harry’s hips to buck desperately into nothing afterwards. “Then what did you say? When you were *baiting* me…?”

Harry was panting hard, his face somehow growing hotter than it already was. “*Please,”* he hissed.

“*What else?”*

In other circumstances, Harry was sure he would have held out longer, refusing to call him that to his face. But his body was on fire and his cock was so swollen it felt like his skin was going to burst and all he could think was that he wanted Voldemort to keep doing what he had been doing with his mouth and tongue badly, very badly, indescribably badly.

"*…Please… Master…"*

Voldemort's magic was more overblown with smugness than Harry had ever felt before, but that was easy enough to forget when he once more wrapped his lips around Harry's weeping cock. He hummed low in his throat as he moved his mouth lower, an electric feeling that Harry swore he felt in his bones.

Very good, Harry, Voldemort purred in his mind. *It sounds so* pretty *when you say it.*

Harry moaned continuously as he worked his tongue down his length, sucking lightly as he did, and yes, *yes*—

He stopped again. Harry screamed out in frustration.

"Say it again," Voldemort demanded quietly.

"*Master,"* Harry successfully spat out at once, too wound up with *need* to waste time being stubborn. "*Please, master, please—"*

His words turned into a strange, spitting moan when he took him in his mouth again. Harry's breathing was erratic, and he was going to come, he was, he *had* to—he threw his head back again, feeling like he was on a razor's edge—

Say it again, Voldemort's voice rang. *It* pleases *me.*

"Ma… master," Harry said, struggling to keep speaking.

Louder.

Harry clamped his eyes shut and moaned, half in pleasure, half in pain, because it was clear now that he wasn't coming because, somehow, Voldemort was preventing it, the sadistic, cruel *fucking fucker—*

Language, Harry, Voldemort's voice echoed condescendingly. *Try again.*

"M…ma—"

Only a strangled, half-hiss made it out of his throat when Voldemort sucked harder, making tears well in Harry's eyes.

"*Master!"* he hissed afterwards. "*Please!"*

Who is the Master of the Elder Wand? Voldemort said in his mind, continuing to lick and suck his cock.

" *Ah—you!"*

And who do you belong to?

"You! Fuck, to you!"

Do you want to come, Harry? For your master?

"Yes, yes, please—fuck, you're insufferable—yes, please, I can't, please, please, please, please, please—"

The next thing Harry knew, Voldemort was *on* him, his tongue no longer on his cock but down his throat, as though he felt the need to catch Harry's pleas with his mouth and consume them. He kissed him roughly, one hand gripping the back of the chair, his magic black, heavy, *toxic*—the chains began to burn far too hot—

Something like a small explosion sounded. Harry's back hit the ground and the chains released him, no longer burning. *He broke the chair,* Harry realized while his head was still spinning from the fall. There were pieces of splintered wood everywhere, and the chains were moving, writhing on the ground like dying snakes. They shuddered and twitched, then went still.

If that shocked Voldemort at all—the fact that, when he had decided to scale Harry like a ladder to assault his mouth, his magic running *rampant* with what Harry supposed were pretty violent intentions—he didn't act like it. He barely missed a fucking beat, moving to better position himself over Harry, deftly using one hand to shove his pants down and the other to grab Harry's throat.

Everything seemed to move in a whirlwind of chaotic need and Voldemort's darkened magic. Harry grabbed Voldemort by his stupid, perfect hair and yanked him down over him, crushing his lips to his, accidentally banging his teeth against his but not really caring. Voldemort bit him *hard* on his lower lip afterward, and their kiss became a war, and angry clashing of tongues and teeth.

You're mine, Voldemort's voice snarled. *Mine, always, you belong to—*

Shut up and fuck me, Harry interrupted, because he could not handle going a minute longer without release, and he definitely couldn't handle one of the Dark Lord's possessive monologues.

Voldemort harshly bit Harry's neck—in response to being told to shut up, probably—but he did listen. Harry felt a wave of magic rolling along his skin and up between his legs, a cool, wet sensation that went *inside* him that he'd experienced once before. His whole body relaxed without his permission, and when Voldemort hoisted one of his legs up he had no ability—or desire, if he was being honest—to fight it. Harry felt him aligning himself, braced himself for it—

Was it Voldemort who did it, or was it he, Harry, who had? It was impossible to tell. The moment Voldemort thrust into him, the connection between their souls ignited, warm and blissfully light. Voldemort seemed surprised by it, too; he gasped then moaned, his head falling against Harry's shoulder, momentarily lost.

Harry wasn't as debilitated by it. He ground his hips forward as best he could, desperate for friction, for movement, for *anything.*

Voldemort gathered himself. He lifted his hips and thrust into him again, hard, slamming Harry's back into the pieces of the broken chair. Harry was reminded of the vanity he'd once been shoved against, where broken glass had pierced his shoulders and back instead.

Round and round and round.

Voldemort thrust into him again, and again, each time striking something deep within Harry that made his whole body sing.

Yes, Harry thought wildly. *Yes, don't stop, don't fucking stop, AH—*

Harry's thoughts ceased altogether as he came, an orgasm that seemed to start somewhere deep and previously unknown to him before his cock was pulsing between them, spilling out on both of their chests in a hot, throbbing mess.

Voldemort didn't stop or even slow in his merciless movements; if anything, he started to fuck him harder and faster.

Be with me.

Harry, his cock still throbbing as the ripples of his orgasm began to ebb, blinked once, and then he was seeing through Voldemort's eyes, feeling the ghost of his body while also feeling Voldemort's… He saw his own gasping, flushing face, could see the way his own eyes were a deep and hazy red…

Do you see how fully you belong to me?

Voldemort slammed into him again, and Harry doubted he would ever get used to this. It was *so* strange, to both feel himself scream and watch as his mouth moved, to feel himself being aggressively fucked *and* to experience it as Voldemort was…

He *could* see it. Harry's neck was currently covered in bright red marks from Voldemort's biting, and his lower lip was huge, almost bruised looking. His hair was insanely messy, sweaty strands of it stuck to his forehead where they framed his lightning bolt scar… the scar from the locket, too, was visible on his chest where his shirt had been partially burned away, and even though he couldn't see it at the moment, Harry knew the hand that was clawing at the back of Voldemort's robes was scarred, too…

Harry James Potter.

I must not tell lies.

Voldemort slowed suddenly. His magic glistened, a little more calm than before, and he looked into Harry's eyes.

"You are the most beautiful person alive," he said, a statement that made Harry's eyes widen.

Voldemort trailed one hand to the scar on his chest, and it was still such a strange thing, to be able to see from Voldemort's perspective as he did it. Light bloomed brighter at his fingertips, and Harry sighed at the softness sensation.

"Beautiful," Voldemort repeated quietly.

Harry felt—and saw, again through Voldemort's eyes—how red his face was becoming. Voldemort didn't say anything else. He grabbed Harry's hands, placing a soft kiss to one of his wrists before he pinned them over Harry's head. He then leaned forward, uncaring of the slickness between them from Harry, and started moving. He was much less aggressive, his thrusts now slow and deep. Harry, who could still feel *everything*, let out a raspy whimper at the intensity of it all.

"Beautiful," Voldemort said in his ear. "*Mine.*"

His magic twisted, and then his thoughts became less coherent. He was grunting, moaning against Harry's neck as he came, his magic sparkling in a flurry of blinding gold.

Harry groaned, too, feeling every bit of it—Voldemort's cock that was deep inside of *him,* engulfed in such wet, tight heat.

Voldemort ground his hips against him harder. He lifted his head and pressed his lips to Harry's, kissing him just as deeply, then released one of his wrists to trace the marks he left on Harry's neck—marks that would vanish soon.

Mine.

Yeah, yes, Harry thought numbly. His body and mind felt like they'd been turned into jello. He leaned his head back, relieved to find himself solely in his body once more. As enjoyable as it was to experience certain things from Voldemort's vantage point, it was also highly disorienting.

Voldemort kissed his neck again. Which was nice, considering he was being gentle, but Harry couldn't help but look around and laugh.

The light between them vanished. Voldemort's aura flickered, annoyed.

"You broke the chair," Harry explained before he could get too angry. "The chains too, I think…"

He didn't think, he *knew,* because the metal links were all cold and lifeless on the courtroom floor. Whatever curse had made them react as they had before was broken by Voldemort when he shattered the chair they were attached to.

Voldemort looked around as well, but barely for more than a second before he returned his attention to Harry's body, particularly his neck. "I am reinventing and rebuilding an entire magical world," he murmured between slightly harder kisses. He sucked on Harry's skin and caught it between his teeth, biting him again before he finished his thought.

"I'll add that to the list."

Chapter End Notes

fanart by Semina-Art (this is crackly but I love it

fanart by pacechicctaya

Insights on Diagon

Coffee, not tea.

Harry was halfway through his second cup that morning as he sat at one of the many sitting areas in Malfoy Manor—strategically, the one in the foyer. It was nearing eleven in the morning, and while it was tempting to go to his room and sleep the day away like he knew Hermione and Ron were, he couldn't.

If Voldemort was content to just… dump him back here after all *that*, leaving him so he could go do whatever secretive, scary, and productive Dark Lord things he had to do… then Harry would be productive, too.

But he was going to be smart about it.

Harry looked down at his clothes, noting how pristine they looked. Voldemort was as skilled at magically mending fabric as he was everything else—one would never guess that so recently these pants and his shirt had been annihilated. Just like Harry's skin (but never his hair; not even Voldemort bothered to try touching that), they looked smooth, perfect. Not innocuous in the slightest.

He wondered how long they could keep this up.

A small *pop* alerted him to the reappearance of Binny. The elf quietly cleaned up the remains of Harry's breakfast—he'd been famished after the mornings… events—and refilled his coffee without being asked.

"Thank you," Harry said. He sipped at the hot, bitter liquid, preferring to drink it black. As requested, Binny had brewed it extra strong.

"Of course, Master Potter," Binny squeaked. He bowed then disappeared, taking the dirty dishes with him.

Harry blew over the rim of his cup and waited. He flipped through that morning's issue of *The Prophet,* finding himself both relieved and annoyed that there were no stress-inducing headlines. More than anything, he was annoyed at himself.

Voldemort was *supposed* to have freed McGonagall last night, and he was *supposed* to have made a list for Harry of all the prisoners being kept there.

Had he? Harry frowned to himself, feeling annoyed all over again. He'd had all night to do it, after all… maybe he had freed McGonagall as promised; maybe he'd been planning on telling him but became distracted by what'd he'd been doing with Hermione…

Or maybe he purposefully wasn't telling Harry what he'd done.

It was *possible*. Voldemort did tend to keep his cards close to his chest; maybe he'd let her out and would tell Harry about it at a moment when he needed to subdue him… knowing him, he'd arrange to have McGonagall suddenly appear in Harry's life unexpectedly and dramatically, the way he'd done with Hagrid, in a gesture that would seem kind and wonderful at the time but would, of course, be underhanded…

It was exhausting, trying to predict what the Dark Lord would do… but Harry liked to think he was getting better at it.

He was still irritated with himself, however, because he *should* have asked. He, Harry, should have inquired directly about her, but he'd completely forgotten with… everything else that happened.

Poor Fred Harry thought again. *Even poorer George, maybe, though…*

What was worse, Harry mused—being wandless and working at the Ministry of Magic as an unpaid servant, essentially, or having a wand and being a Death Eater, which, in today's world, was an enviable position? One which left you forever branded and tethered to Lord Voldemort, of course, but…

The illusion of freedom, prestige, and having a wand was deeply appealing.

Harry was still pondering this when the fireplace flickered green, and he felt a familiar silvery sheen of magic. *Good*, Harry thought. He was getting worried that he'd have to wait around all day.

Draco Malfoy froze like a startled deer when his eyes landed on Harry.

Harry supposed he couldn't blame him. The last time Draco had seen him, he was torturing his aunt and screaming at her to say mercy… before he attempted to kill her, anyway. And now here he was, sitting at the table, reading the morning paper and enjoying a nice cuppa like it was just another lovely Saturday.

Harry decided the best way to address this situation was to not

address it at all. Draco Malfoy was a self-declared expert in compartmentalizing, after all.

Harry grinned at Draco from over the top of his paper. “Morning,” he said, raising his cup slightly.

Draco’s magic flickered wildly with trepidation. “Coffee?” Harry asked when he continued to look wary. “Binny’s just made some, it’s excellent.”

“No thanks,” Draco said, and Harry grinned wider—he was obviously annoyed at being offered a drink in his own home, which told Harry he was not *so* disturbed that he was incapable of being his usual, haughty self.

“Probably for the best,” Harry said. He folded the paper in half and set it on the table, then stood. “This is my third cup, I don’t need another, I don’t think… and we should get going.”

Harry took several large gulps, half-emptying his mug and grimacing afterwards. He set it down and walked towards where Draco was, next to the fireplace.

“What—going where?” Draco asked.

“Diagon Alley,” Harry answered

“Er—now?”

“Now.”

“Why?”

“Why does anyone ever want to go to Diagon Alley, Draco?” When he didn’t respond, Harry said, “To shop, of course.”

“What else do you need from Diagon that you don’t already have here?” Draco asked, clearly suspicious.

“Maybe you’ll find out. Let’s go.”

Draco’s magic brightened in alarm. “You want me to go with you?”

“Of course. I am a wizard in rehabilitation, and you are my alleged new best friend who is supposed to be teaching me the errors of my past. We've already been out once before, after all. Besides, Hermione and Ron are both asleep, I don’t think your mother is home, and I can

imagine few things less enjoyable than going shopping with your father, even if he did actually show his face at a convenient time. Honestly, I'd much prefer to go alone, but I don't want to get yelled at by anyone, as I surely would if I ventured out into the world without a proper escort. So, I'm taking you with me."

Harry grabbed a handful of floo powder. "The Leaky Cauldron, Diagon Alley!" he shouted, and the green flames erupted. He looked at Draco and gestured towards it. "After you."

"But—I don't—"

Harry lost the rest of what little patience he had. He pulled out his wand, and when Draco startled with fear at seeing that Harry had been given his wand back, he took advantage of it. Harry shoved him forcefully into the flames. Draco's yelp was swallowed up as quickly as he was, and he vanished.

Harry grabbed another handful of powder. "It's going to be a long day," he muttered, then he too shouted his destination and left the manor.

Diagon Alley was busy. Harry smiled as they walked down the bustling street, feeling a bit slap-happy from the combination of being entirely too sleep-deprived and running on adrenaline and caffeine. He felt strangely good enough, in fact, that he found it easy to ignore the plethora of magic, the stares when people noticed them, the pointing, the whispering, the occasional gasps.

What was most interesting was that, more than once, Harry heard and saw a most monumental exchange.

'For Voldemort and Valour.'

No less than three times did Harry overhear witches and wizards saying this to each other, but what was even more intriguing was that it was not only a mere phrase being spoken, but that there was an action accompanying it. Something with both hands, he thought he saw, where they twisted around and went from flat to forming fists…

He thought to ask Draco, who had reluctantly fallen into step at his side, about it—surely he would know more about such a thing?—but Harry decided not to. He was on a mission, and he wasn't going to let anything distract him.

“We’re going to Gringotts first,” Harry declared.

“Gringotts? We don’t have to. Whatever you want, my family has—”

“I don’t want your family’s money,” Harry interrupted. “I have my own, thanks.”

Draco gave a half-hearted shrug, but didn’t press the issue.

Malfoy was a surprisingly pleasant companion. Harry was certain it was because he had not recovered from Harry’s terrifying and deeply uncharacteristic display of rage-induced power, but still. He barely said a word as they weaved through the crowds, and Harry was grateful for the silence.

When they arrived at Gringotts, Harry paused in the lobby. “You can wait here,” he said, nodding towards a small sitting area where several other witches and wizards waited.

Draco looked for only a moment like he wanted to argue, but then his magic dimmed and he decided against it. He nodded, then went to take a seat in the furthest chair in the corner of the lobby, as far away from everyone else as he could be.

Excellent, Harry thought. *I should explode in fits of violent anger more often. It makes Malfoy far more agreeable.*

A state that would surely not last long, but Harry was glad to be capitalizing on it now.

Ignoring the looks he was beginning to attract by merely standing in the foyer, Harry made his way to one of the available tellers, but he paused before he approached the counter. He didn’t notice any obvious magic around the goblins the same way he did with witches and wizards. When he focused, he perceived a sort of deep, thrumming feeling, but it was hard to pinpoint, and seemed harder to grasp the more he tried.

Then he remembered that he rarely felt house-elf magic, too, nor did he feel magical auras of the creatures he came into contact with while in the Forbidden Forest.

Harry filed these thoughts away for another day.

“Name?” asked the goblin as he came to the counter. He was busy scribbling something on some parchment, and didn’t immediately look

up.

“Harry Potter.”

The goblin’s quill stilled. His body froze, and then, very slowly, he lifted his head.

Oh, what are the bloody odds? Harry wondered. For he was almost sure —though he could be wrong, as they looked fairly similar—that this… this was the goblin that he had cursed. That he had Imperiused, that he had controlled and forced to bring him, Hermione, Ron, and Griphook down to the Lestrange vault…

Bogrod did not look pleased to see him.

“Er. Hello,” Harry said awkwardly. “I… would like to access my vault. If I’m allowed. Am I allowed? Am… huh. Am I banned from Gringotts?”

Harry voiced the last part as though he were speaking more to himself. He was fairly certain that ‘using the Imperius curse on a goblin, breaking into Gringotts, stealing an artifact out of the Lestrange vault, and letting loose a dragon when escaping’ had not been on his list of supposed crimes when he’d been on trial. Purposefully, he was certain, so as not to draw unwanted attention to the fact that he had managed to do such a thing…

Bogrod gave him an icy smile. “One moment, Mr. Potter,” he said. He then turned and walked away, disappearing behind a door in the back.

Harry waited, anxious, and as he did he saw that the rest of the goblins had noticed him, too. Even the ones who were helping other customers had turned to stare, which of course meant the people they were helping turned to stare, and in minutes the entire bloody bank was going to be looking at him, Harry thought bitterly.

Fortunately, he didn’t have to wait long. A different goblin appeared, and this one Harry *definitely* knew. “Griphook!” he exclaimed.

Griphook’s grin was just as icy as Bogrod’s had been. “Hello again, Mr. Potter,” he said. He stared at him, his gaze bouncing from one of Harry’s eyes to the other. “My, how you’ve changed.”

Harry glared, but decided not to waste time or draw more attention to his *already* attention-grabbing, red eyes. “I want to access my vault,” he said. “Will you take me, or am I banned and you’re just here for a

friendly chat to reminisce before kicking me out of the bank?"

It was difficult to not start yelling at him, to call him a dirty traitor who abandoned them with the sword the moment he had the chance.

"You're not banned, Mr. Potter," said Griphook, sounding as though he wished otherwise. "We don't limit access to family vaults based on crimes… fortunately for you. We do miss our dragon, though. Perhaps you would replace it for us as an act of goodwill?"

"Replace your sad, enslaved dragon?" Harry balked. Griphook nodded. "No! I'm not—just take me to my vault, Griphook."

Griphook looked annoyed, but then said, "Fine. Do you have your key?"

"I… no, and now that you say that, I… don't have any idea where it is," Harry said, and he really didn't.

Griphook looked even more annoyed, but his thin smile remained fixed. "We can identify you by other means, of course, and create a new key… May I see your wand?"

Harry felt his mouth run dry. "Er… well, you can but… this might just raise more questions…"

He retracted his yew wand. Griphook took it, carefully and slowly examining it, and Harry was certain that at any moment he was going to scream that this was not his wand, that this was an imposter, and a whole, horribly dramatic scene was about to unfold…

But then Griphook nodded approvingly and handed it back. "Yes, this is perfectly in order," he said. "The wand of Harry Potter."

Harry took his wand, confused. How did they know he had obtained a new wand? Had Voldemort told them, had he somehow foreseen this…? Why would he do that?

"We were informed," Griphook said, answering Harry's unasked questions. "Being kept extremely up-to-date on all measures related to security has become, if possible, an even bigger priority as of very recently… as you might imagine."

"R… Right," Harry said, unsure of what else he should say. He didn't think it would be wise to point out that Griphook himself was the reason they were able to successfully break into the bank at all. "Just

—can we go?"

"In a moment, Mr. Potter. I must retrieve a new key which I will then use to match with your vault, rendering your old key obsolete. So, if you happen to locate it, you should discard it."

"Great, I'll be sure to do that," Harry said. "I'll wait right here, then."

Griphook bowed his head before he left. Moments later, he returned with a bright gold key that greatly resembled Harry's old one, and he gestured for Harry to follow him back to where the carts waited, ready to take visitors down to their underground vaults. The other goblins all watched him warily as they went, distracted from their customers as Griphook led him away.

"Do they think I'm going to curse one of them?" Harry muttered once they were out of their earshot and sight, settling into a cart. "Or that I'm going to let loose some other enslaved, magical beast?"

Griphook, to Harry's surprise, grinned crookedly at this, looking amused. "They fear you," he said as he flicked his wrist. The cart began to move. "Not because of what you have done in the past, though that memory is still terribly raw—"

"And which you've surely avoided telling them you played an integral part in," Harry interjected.

Griphook ignored him. "They fear who you are now… or rather, who you will become."

The cart took a sudden sharp turn and Harry had to grab the side to stop from falling. Griphook didn't budge, looking comfortable. "What is that supposed to mean?" Harry asked.

"I think you know what it means, Mr. Potter."

"Pretend I don't. Indulge me."

The cart took another sharp turn, then plunged down. Griphook leaned against the ledge. "That you have been supremely favored by the Dark Lord," he said. "That he has decided, for whatever reason, to *groom* you… and that you will become everything you once stood against."

Harry was mildly horrified by how casually he spoke, particularly by the emphasis he put on the word *groom*. "You're wrong," he said

hollowly. “You’re all completely wrong.”

“I did not say that’s what *I* believe,” Griphook drawled. “Only what most of them believe, based on the outcome of your trial, among other things. You’ve been fully pardoned, you are now living with the Malfoy family… You have been given his wand… and we all know how covetous you wizards are with your precious wands.”

He spoke the last words with clear disdain, and it took a great deal for Harry to not point out how similar goblins were with their magical objects.

“And that’s to say nothing of how he’s changed your eyes… Yes, all clear signs of what he hopes to do with you. Your new role.”

“New role?”

Griphook gave him another slanted grin. “Yes. If the Dark Lord is King in this new era of wizarding kind, Harry Potter… then you are his chosen Prince.”

The cart slowed, then came to a stop. “We’ve arrived,” Griphook said, taking in Harry’s shocked expression and relishing it. He hopped out of the cart before Harry could respond and made his way to Vault 687, where Harry followed.

When he was at the giant, metal door, Griphook withdrew the gold key. He held it up, lining it up with the keyhole, and began murmuring something. That’s when Harry saw it.

A flash of magic.

It was unlike any aura he’d perceived before; something like liquid amber light that hardened like steel before becoming molten again. *Astonishing*, Harry thought. *Goblin magic.*

It was gone almost as quickly as it had come. The key flashed white as Griphook inserted it fully into the lock, turned it, and brought it back out.

“Your new key, Mr. Potter,” he said, offering it to him.

Harry numbly took it and shoved it in his pocket. “Thanks,” he mumbled.

Griphook pushed the door to his vault open. Harry stepped inside, and

he couldn't help but feel a rush of relief. Some very small part of him had worried that, somehow, for some awful reason, his vault had been cleaned out after he'd been captured.

This was not the case. His small fortune was untouched, and as he looked at the piles of gold, silver, and bronze, Harry was nearly overcome by a sense of sadness that had never struck him before while here. He forced the feeling away. Harry quickly gathered more than enough galleons for what he wanted to do, put them in his inner robe pocket, and left. Griphook closed the door behind him without comment and accompanied him back to the cart.

Harry waited until they were on their way before he spoke. "What do you think, then?"

Griphook looked at him curiously. "About who I'll become," Harry elaborated. "You said that's what they all think, not you. So… what do you think, Griphook?"

The goblin tilted his head as he examined Harry's face, his focus settling not on his red eyes, but his scar. "I think that you are an unusual wizard, Harry Potter," he said. The cart turned, then went up, up, up.

"…and I think you will surprise us all."

"Right… so, we're going to split up."

Draco had continued to be an amicable (if uncomfortable) escort as they left the bank, following Harry with a near dutiful gait. But as they came to a specific crossroads at Diagon Alley, Harry knew this arrangement had to come to an end.

For the time being, at least.

"What?" Draco asked.

"You're going to go to the Leaky and wait for me there," Harry said, nodding towards the pub. "I have something I need to do. Alone. I won't be too long."

Draco's magic shimmered with immediate distaste and, much stronger, curiosity. Harry could tell that he wanted to ask—as well as voice his annoyance at being told to wait for Harry like he was his house-elf, and probably refuse to do so—but Harry wasn't going to

give him the chance.

“An hour, tops,” Harry said as he began to back away. “Here, you can drink as much as you want, on me. I know you don’t need the money, but firewhiskey tastes better when someone else is buying.”

Harry flipped a galleon on his thumb, sending it flying high into the air. Perhaps acting purely on Seeker instinct, Draco followed it with his eyes and made to catch it.

Harry ducked the second Draco looked up, whipped out his Invisibility Cloak, and threw it over himself as he dashed away. He heard Draco call out for him a moment later, then heard him swear loudly, but Harry was already weaving through the crowd, unable to be seen or followed, chuckling as he went.

Harry was pleased to find that Ollivander’s Wand Shop was not as busy as the rest of Diagon was. Perhaps it was still too early for the rush of eleven-year-olds who would be needing their first wands; perhaps he was just lucky.

Regardless, Harry smiled when he looked through the window and saw only Ollivander himself present, sitting behind the desk, reading.

Harry had seen and perceived a lot of people’s magic. And while they were all striking in their own way, some were definitely more powerful or more beautiful, more fluid or more rigid, lighter or darker. But Ollivander’s magic was, by far, one of the more unique auras Harry had come across thus far.

It was earthy, dark brown and mottled green with dull rays of light, like sunshine coming through the leaves of a great, leafy tree. Harry closed his eyes and simply enjoyed it for a moment, while it was calm and pure. He was certain it no longer would be the moment he interrupted his reading.

Harry’s heart raced as he stood there, contemplating. He knew this was risky. He knew that coming here to talk to Ollivander would end disastrously if he was caught. But he had to do it, he had to know… and if Voldemort was preoccupied, this may be his best chance…

After taking a quick look around to make sure no one was watching him, Harry pulled off his cloak and entered the shop.

Ollivander looked up when the bell rang above the door, and his face

paled when his eyes landed on Harry. Just as Harry suspected it might, his magic darkened—like clouds had come in, swallowing up whatever beams of light there were.

"Hello, Mr. Ollivander," Harry said as the door closed behind him.

Ollivander did, at least, look physically much better than when Harry had seen him last. He was no longer the gaunt and skeletal man that being kept prisoner at Malfoy Manor had turned him into. He looked much more like Harry remembered him from years ago—huge, moonlike eyes, wiry hair, lined face.

His expression at seeing Harry Potter in his shop was nothing short of shocked. "Mr. Potter," he said quietly.

Harry smiled as warmly as he could. "I'm glad to see you didn't close up shop," he said. "Not that I would have blamed you, after, well…"

Harry mentally kicked himself. It was probably unwise to immediately bring up the year he'd been captured and tortured for information.

To his great surprise, Ollivander only returned his smile—though his magic continued to dim. "Yes, well," he said, "I have an obligation to continue making the very best of wands for the next generation… in whatever conditions they may be raised. At least until I take on an apprentice. I am fortunate enough to be a free man, now, despite the horrors I have been through… a truth you can relate to, it would seem."

He stared very pointedly into Harry's eyes, looking like he might say something about them, but then shook his head. He closed the book he'd been reading and set it aside. "What brings you to my shop today, Mr. Potter?"

Harry was shocked at how well recovered the wandmaker seemed to be, but he wasn't about to question it. His pulse continued to pick up speed. *Do it now and do it quickly. Have the conversation and get out.* "I have a few questions, if you don't mind. And I don't have a lot of time, so I won't be long."

Ollivander's expression didn't change. "Questions about…?"

"About… wand loyalty. And allegiances and… the Elder Wand."

Ollivander's magic bristled with alarm, like tree limbs snapping and twisting in the wind. "Please," Harry said. "Just a few questions and

I'll go… please."

Ollivander looked afraid. He looked like he wanted to say he had already told him and the Dark Lord both everything he knew about the Elder Wand and that he never wanted to discuss it again.

He stood. Ollivander walked around his desk, crossed his shop, and for a moment Harry thought he was going to walk right out the front door and leave him there in a full-blown retreat, but then he stopped. He flipped the sign on the door around so that, to anyone walking by outside, it would read 'Closed.'

He then faced Harry again. "Come with me to the back room, away from the window," he said.

Harry followed him, where he was led to a workshop-like space where the wandmaker must have constructed his infamous wands—there were desks with various piles of raw wood, a few cauldrons hanging over currently unlit fireplaces, shelves and shelves of what Harry assumed were ingredients and bottled potions.

Ollivander took a seat at one of the emptier tables and he gestured for Harry to take the stool across from him. He nodded once.

Harry didn't waste any time. "How do I know if a wand is no longer loyal to me?" he asked as he sat. "How do I know if I've lost its allegiance?"

"What wand specifically are you speaking of?"

"This one."

Harry pulled out the yew wand and set it on the table. Ollivander stared at it, his magic flickering with recognition. He picked it up and held it delicately with both hands.

"Ah," he said, and while he'd looked initially surprised, he seemed to recover quickly. "Ah, yes. I see… Your wand's brother. How interesting. Where is your holly—?"

"Gone." Then, not wanting to talk about his dear, shattered wand which he missed so greatly, he went on, saying, "I was given this wand… Voldemort gave it to me himself."

Ollivander's magic twisted and his whole body jumped at his name. "You'll have to get over that," Harry said darkly. "You know. For

Voldemort and Valour."

Ollivander let out a nervous laugh. "Yes, I have heard that more and more as of late… such a strange time we live in, Mr. Potter. To have seen the changes in our society as I have, as others my age have… to have heard that name first as curious whispers, then as though it were a curse, then not at all, as the fear of him became so great… and now…"

His moon-like eyes stared somewhere over Harry's head, glossing over. "Mr. Ollivander," Harry said, drawing his attention back to him. "I'd really like to make this quick. This wand. Voldemort gave it to me —there was no, I dunno, struggle or anything, it was just handed over. It's been working fine for me. More than fine, actually… does that mean I had its allegiance, at that point?"

Ollivander blinked owlishly a few times, then looked critically at the yew wand. "Mmmmm… well, this is a peculiar circumstance… a unique one, perhaps. Considering that this wand shares the same core as your old wand… and my condolences there, my condolences… I would guess that this wand performs well for you because it senses that in you. It feels at home in your hands because it is."

He offered Harry the wand back. Hesitantly, Harry took it—and it did indeed feel warm to the touch, comfortable. "But I… was recently disarmed," Harry muttered, and he felt embarrassed to say it, like he was admitting a great failure. "Does being disarmed mean I've lost its loyalty?"

"Does it *feel* like you've lost its loyalty?" Ollivander asked.

"I don't think so. But I also haven't tried to perform any magic with it since then, yet…"

"Well! What are you waiting for?" Ollivander jumped to his feet and walked around the table. "For a yew wand, let's see, nothing so tame, nothing boring… Yew does not appreciate the mediocre, no, no, no."

He looked at Harry. "Cast a corporeal patronus," he said. "And if you are successful and it feels as it always has, then you will have your answer."

"Why does everyone suggest that like it's just so *easy*?" Harry mumbled, knowing full-well that he had recently told Ron to produce one in a similar way. He stood as well. "Okay, I'll give it a go…"

A happy thought, a happy thought… Harry closed his eyes and tried to conjure something… something happy…

He surprised himself when the first happy memory that came to mind was from a very long time ago. It wasn't a huge event—and that was precisely why it was so impactful.

It was in Harry's first year at school. Not long after the troll incident, when he and Ron had sort of unanimously and without speaking decided that Hermione the bookworm was theirs now, and the three of them had begun to spend their evenings together in the common room, whether that was playing chess and chatting or working on homework (oddly enough, both Harry's and Ron's marks greatly improved at this point).

There was one night where the three of them were up late, working on a Potions essay, and they were lucky enough to secure the best cushy chairs by the fire. Ron had fallen asleep, and his head had fallen on Harry's shoulder in a way that meant he couldn't move. Hermione had smiled at him knowingly and scribbled a note on a piece of parchment to him that read, 'since you're stuck, I'll look over your essay if you like', to which Harry had nodded gratefully, and she had.

It was while Ron was drooling on his shoulder, asleep, and Hermione was reading his work by the light of a crackling fire… that had been the first time Harry felt like he had a real, loving family.

Harry felt that warm, fuzzy feeling in his very bones when he shouted, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

In a brilliant flash of silver, the stag emerged, as welcome and radiant as always. Harry felt the familiar rush of relief, too, that it was still a stag; he was still Harry, and this wand…

This wand was definitely still his.

Ollivander clapped happily. "Bravo, Mr. Potter," he said. The stag cantered around him in a circle. "I take it that means the yew was not resistant in any way?"

"Not at all," Harry said. He smiled at the stag, then flicked his wand once more, and it vanished. "It feels perfectly fine. But… Why is that? Not that I'm complaining, I just… I don't understand. If I was disarmed, why did I not lose its loyalty?"

Ollivander resumed his seat at the table, and Harry joined him.

“Wands are not all so simple,” he said. “May I ask who disarmed you?”

“Voldemort,” Harry said begrudgingly.

Ollivander did not jump again, at least, though his magic contorted in an awful way. “Ah… I see. You were… *dueling*… the Dark Lord.”

“No,” Harry said. “I was, uh, *dueling*… someone else. And I sort of got carried away, and so Voldemort disarmed me before I could. Er.”

Harry paused; Ollivander said nothing, only waited. “I… might have done something really drastic and bad, but Voldemort interrupted and disarmed me before I could.”

Ollivander’s face and magic were both shaken. “It was someone who would have really deserved it,” Harry went on, feeling his face warm —for how must it have sounded, to hear that he, Harry Potter, needed to be stopped from being *bad* by the *worst* wizard there was? “Just— those details aren’t important. I wasn’t dueling him.”

“…Hm.” Ollivander’s shocked expression turned to one of thoughtfulness. “That may make all the difference, truly. Wands, like people, have their tendencies. Some wands are extreme with their loyalties, and will only bend to a new master when they feel they have been rightfully and justly won… I may hazard a guess that the yew wand feels as cheated as you may have felt, and therefore still prefers you to the one who disarmed you… but that is a fascinating conundrum, seeing that the one who disarmed you is its former wielder; arguably, its true owner…”

He began tapping the table with one finger. “Hm. Perhaps it considers you both as a proper master, and has little preference. It does have that same feather of the same phoenix as its core, after all… perhaps it happily bends to you both.”

Harry turned the yew wand in his hands, like he might find a concrete answer carved into the wood. Ollivander didn’t know about the horcrux, about how he held a part of the Dark Lord's soul… Harry wondered if that was what the yew wand recognized; if that was why it felt so right in his hands from the first moment and always would…

But he couldn’t tell Ollivander that.

“Maybe,” Harry murmured. “Okay… well, let’s say you’re right. It recognizes both of us as a proper master even now. What… what

would that mean, if…"

Harry took a very deep breath. His pulse picked up. This was the most dangerous part of the conversation; the part he was anxious to have but needed to know…

"Voldemort has the Elder Wand," Harry said quickly, before he could lose his nerve. "He's had it, as I feared he would, but—but I think *I* was its rightful master. I disarmed the person who was its master before, and I think it *was* loyal to me… but now I've been disarmed. By Voldemort, who currently wields it, and… and does this mean that he's the rightful master of it now?"

Ollivander's skin became very pale. His branching magic twisted and swayed, like a cold, dark wind had blown about. "You're… you're certain?"

"That he disarmed me?" Harry asked, annoyed. "Yes, I'm fairly certain —"

"That he found it. That he's wielding the true Elder Wand."

Harry nodded, feeling he didn't need to go into detail about how Voldemort had robbed Dumbledore's grave, as he had won it from Grindelwald… "Yes," he said. "I'm very certain."

"Oh… dear."

Ollivander looked like he might have fallen over, were he not already sitting down. "As I said once before, that—"

"Crucio!"

His screams were infinitely more satisfying to hear than any words he'd uttered thus far. The power of the curse was even more intoxicating than usual; his wand was burning like a fierce torch in his hands, hungry for more, more.

More.

It took substantial self-control to lift it. Macnair was twitching, coughing up blood. Pathetic.

"M-m-m-y L-lord, I, we…"

Voldemort's focus flashed upwards; he'd all but forgotten about Rookwood for a moment. How rude of him.

“Crucio!”

Screaming, writhing, pain, more. *Voldemort could feel the power building with a toxic pull, greater than it ever had before, lovely dark magic curling in his chest, both consuming and emptying his very soul like a serpent devouring its own tail. It was as easy as breathing, torturing these worthless men. Easier, even.*

*“Give me one reason,” Voldemort seethed as he once more reluctantly lifted his curse, “*one *reason why I should not kill you both right now. What other punishment would fit this crime—this, your sin of eternal ineptitude? How and why should I forgive either of you for letting her slip from your grasp?”*

Macnair was pushing himself forward on his knees, dragging himself through his own blood. “…My… my Lord… pl-please—”

“Mr. Potter! Mr. Potter!”

Harry inhaled a gulp of air as though he’d been trapped underwater, unable to breathe. He was on the ground, and he was being shaken by both shoulders by Ollivander. His scar burned wickedly.

That vision—that feeling—oh, God, what—?

Harry forced the images still flashing in his head away, trying desperately to ignore the pain in his forehead. “I’m fine,” he said, getting to his feet.

A blatant lie, and an obvious one—he had just collapsed and was now shaking—but Harry pushed through. “Totally fine, so sorry,” he said in a voice that was much too high. “The Elder Wand—would he be the proper master of it, then?”

Ollivander was staring at Harry like he’d sprung a second head. “Are… you sure you’re alright, Mr. Potter?” he asked. “You were just —”

“I’m fine!” Harry snapped, though his scar still burned. “Please, just answer the question.”

Ollivander’s aura was contorted, like he was very unsure of what to make of Harry’s sudden episode. But then, as Harry continued to look at him expectantly, he said, “I… I would venture to say that yes, yes he is.”

It wasn't a surprising answer by any means, but Harry felt his stomach drop all the same. "Fuck," he swore, all but throwing himself back onto his stool.

"Here… you dropped this."

Ollivander handed Harry his yew wand. Harry gratefully took it, and was still surprised at just how right it felt in his fingers. He put it in his pocket.

"It is a bleak reality," Ollivander murmured, and while Harry appreciated that he continued the conversation, he could tell he was deeply troubled. He watched Harry with concern flashing in his magic, looking like he was anticipating that Harry might explode at any moment. "For the Dark Lord to be wielding such a powerful wand, and to have its proper allegiance… that is a terrifying prospect indeed…"

"Not helping," Harry muttered as he held his face in his hands. It was hard to think straight with his scar aching so badly and with what he had just seen still bright in his mind… but it did at least mean that Voldemort was wholly… *preoccupied*…

But why he was torturing two of his Death Eaters, Harry could not focus on now. "So I'd have to disarm him to earn its allegiance back," he said. "Right? Yeah, that's fine. Not a problem at all."

Harry scoffed at himself. Ollivander, however, had begun to pace, and his magic was not nearly as distraught as it was before.

"Perhaps," he said, "perhaps not. I have done much thinking on this subject since we last spoke. While it has a notorious history for murder, the reality is that what the Elder Wand always follows *power*… and power can come in many shapes and forms. Disarming an opponent, surely, killing them, of course… but there are other ways to overpower someone, Mr. Potter."

"What do you mean?"

"I suppose I could mean anything," Ollivander said—which Harry found as unhelpful as his declaration that Voldemort having the Elder Wand's loyalty was *bad news.*

"What, like—like besting him in a game of chess or something?" Harry said, laughing bitterly. *Fuck*, his scar hurt.

“Oh, no,” said Ollivander, taking Harry’s joke seriously. “That would be a display of wit, of critical thinking… no, the Elder Wand follows *power*. If it is the Master of the Elder Wand that you seek to become, then you must *overpower* the current Master.”

“Oh, great. Thanks for clearing that up.” Angrily, Harry stood. It didn’t seem he was going to get anything more from this conversation, and he couldn’t focus any longer besides, with the way his head was screaming in pain.

“I should… I should probably erase your memory,” Harry said slowly. “Not that I think anyone will come for you, knowing I’ve asked you anything, but… maybe I should, just in case.”

Which was to say nothing of his supposed upcoming Occlumency lessons with Lord Voldemort himself, but Harry had a plan where that was concerned. A potentially disastrous plan at best, but, well. Most of his plans were potentially disastrous, but he did what he had to do.

Ollivander gave him a weak smile. “Even if you were the very best at memory modification, Mr. Potter, there would be no point. Memory modifications can be seen and adjusted by those who are highly gifted in the Mind Arts.”

He put his hand on Harry’s shoulder. “If being kept prisoner in that horrible cell for so long has taught me anything, it’s that there is no point living in secrecy and fear. You, a free man, came to my shop to ask questions. I, a free man, gave answers, not advice. Besides… I am very good at seeing trouble when it's headed my way, these days.”

He lifted his wrist, and where Harry thought he was going to see the face of a watch, he saw instead a foggy, glass surface where shrouded figures loomed in the background.

“Is that foe glass?” Harry asked.

“Indeed.”

“That’s… pretty brilliant."

“One of my many brilliant ideas… Believe me when I say if I get even the slightest inkling that I should be in danger, then I may indeed close up shop for a time. Now. Did you have any other questions pertaining to wandlore that I might help you with?”

Harry sighed heavily. “No, I don’t think so. Thank you for speaking

with me, especially about this. I know it's risky, and… just. Thank you."

"Of course."

He led Harry out of the back room, towards the front of the shop. "One must wonder, Mr. Potter," he murmured thoughtfully as they walked, "when it comes to wand loyalties and allegiances and their unique… preferences, for lack of a better word… and with how thirsty the Deathstick is, in particular, for power…"

He looked into Harry's eyes, his own as wide and silver as two full moons. "There is the Master of the Elder Wand, yes… but who is the Master of the Master of the Elder Wand?"

Harry's lips parted, dumbfounded. His scar still burned furiously yet in the back of his mind he heard the familiar, spiteful voice:

…*How would that make you feel, Harry…? To have* me *on a leash…*

Ollivander bowed his head, ignoring what must have been a very stricken expression on Harry's face. "Good day, Mr. Potter," he said, gesturing towards the door.

Harry, feeling altogether too flustered, went to leave. He pushed open the door, about to all but run down the street, but then stopped before he stepped outside. "Wait," he said, turning around.

Ollivander looked at him expectantly. "Wait, so—I came here thinking I might need to get another wand… in case this one wasn't entirely… keen on me anymore, I suppose. But it is, so I shouldn't, right? Or should I, maybe, just in case…?"

In part, he was hoping—in vain, he knew—to get his old wand back. Like Ollivander might have some secret *third* wand that he'd been hiding that was *also* was made with a feather from Dumbledore's phoenix; a wand that may not have been his holly one exactly, but would at least not be the one that had murdered his parents.

But Ollivander looked scandalized at the very notion. "Oh, no, I couldn't in good conscience do that," he said. He looked about his shop, where his wands sat on the many shelves in their little slim boxes, waiting to be united with their future owners. "No, I'm afraid that the wand in your possession is indeed *keen* on you, Mr. Potter… and so I could not sell you another. For one, it would mean potentially keeping a wand from a more suitable match in the future, one where

it would not be second-rate, as it were, and for another, well…"

He gave Harry a wry smile. A bit of light flickered back to life in his magic; warm, glowing beams. "They tend to get a bit… jealous," he said. "And no one wants to wield a jealous wand."

He bowed again, lower than before. "Good day, Mr. Potter," he repeated, and this time Harry did not linger. He nodded and left, feeling somehow even more off-kilter.

Harry pulled out his cloak, deciding he much preferred to not be stared at everywhere he went. His scar was absolutely on fire, and he had a dark, sinking feeling—

"Crucio!"

Rookwood's screams did not last long this time—he began foaming at the mouth, choking on his own blood where he spasmed on the ground, a pitiful, wretched thing—unworthy of his mercy, unworthy—dark magic was singing in his blood; black and oh so sweet—

It was almost impossible to end such loveliness, but Rookwood might crack soon, too soon… He should stay his hand… But his wand was scorching, yearning for more… He was unworthy, he was, they both were, but he should not spill magical blood so freely… They still had their uses…

But this power… was intoxicating…

"M…my…. Lord… please… We beg you… We're sor—"

A lightning strike of rage assaulted him. He did not want their apologies. He wanted them to perform*, and they had failed him yet again. He wanted them to suffer. He wanted them to* scream*.*

"Crucio!"

He wanted to inhale the power into his blackened lungs and cherish it; he wanted to exhale the fury and retribution that was owed—he wanted— more—

Harry barely managed to stay on his feet as the vision dissipated. He leaned against the railing outside the steps of Ollivander's shop, clutching it and his cloak which remained over his head. His body was vibrating as though he had just cast the Cruciatus curse himself; his heart was palpating erratically and he could feel the lingering sensation of toxic, evocative magic.

Wherever he was, Voldemort was losing his grip. But he didn't have anyone to pull him from the edge of falling into the abyss of dark magic; he never had. And the way it had felt…

Harry had thought he felt power when he was torturing Bellatrix, but that… that was infinitely… *more*. Disturbingly powerful magic, even as a vision from a great distance. And Harry could tell, just by the feelings in the back of Voldemort's mind, that it hadn't been quite like that, before…

Harry swallowed hard, steadying himself and standing fully upright. He could not allow Voldemort's rage to affect him like this, not right now. He needed to focus so that he could at least make it back to the Leaky; though he'd wanted to make a few other stops on this outing, Harry no longer thought this was wise. But even making it back to where Draco awaited him seemed impossible. He wasn't sure how he might manage to walk that far with the Dark Lord's mercurial wrath on the periphery of his mind and this burning in his scar, and—

Harry could have slapped himself. *I can apparate,* he thought stupidly. It hadn't crossed his mind before because he'd spent so long in warded areas, but he could apparate to the entryway of Leaky. He might have laughed, if he wasn't in so much pain and he didn't feel like he might fall apart at any moment.

Destination, Determination and Deliberation, he thought as he closed his eyes. Harry then gripped his cloak more tightly and turned on the spot.

He appeared exactly where he meant to—right in front of The Leaky Cauldron. Unfortunately, no one else could see him, and Harry was immediately knocked over by an unaware wizard who could not have been more baffled as he too fell backwards, yelping as he went.

Harry didn't wait to see if he was all right—he rolled away in a move that was reminiscent of a spiral dive when he was on a broom, swiped his cloak off as he went, and popped back up on his feet several paces away. He walked at a brisk pace away from where the fallen wizard was making a bit of a scene ("What the bloody hell just happened!? Have I been pickpocketed?") and went into the Leaky before anyone had noticed him.

He spotted Draco at once. He was sitting at a small booth in the far corner of the bar, a half-full glass in front of him, reading the very same issue of *The Daily Prophet* that Harry had been reading that

morning. Harry made his way over to him.

“We need to go,” he said under his breath once he’d arrived at his table. “Now.”

Malfoy only shot him a quizzical look at how ominous he was being, but then he threw the paper down and stood. “About time,” he muttered. He grabbed his glass and drained the rest of his drink in one gulp. “Thought I’d be stuck here all—”

“Crucio!”

It was not enough, it was not enough, he needed more—he was hardly a shell of man now, regardless, it did not matter, he was a waste, worthless, unworthy—

He lifted the curse, feeling the pull of magic like he never had before. He followed it home.

“Avada Kedavra!”

Green light swallowed the room, a more gorgeous color than he had ever seen… Rookwood slumped and stilled, the life gone from his eyes in a mere moment…

Voldemort’s blood was on fire.

He held the Elder Wand deferentially in his hands, examining the dark wood lovingly, in wonder… it had never performed with such… vigor, with such a driving, burning passion… This, here, was the power he had expected; greater, even, than he had once hoped for… Why now, he wondered, why now; what had changed to make the Deathstick glory in his hands so… It was… resplendent, it was transcendent, it was…

It was not enough.

Macnair was cowering in the corner, whining feebly.

“Potter! Potter—*Harry!*”

Harry barely resurfaced at the sound of his name, which was being shouted into his ear by a distressed Draco Malfoy. Draco was holding him up and Harry was trembling against him; everything he could see was tinted a damning green and he could feel cold, dark, mind-numbing magic in his teeth, on his skin, with every beat of his pounding heart. His scar was blazing hot and the pull of Voldemort’s

mind was tugging on his own with a colossal gravity, he could not resist it—

Get us out of here, now, Harry thought desperately as he looked into Draco's eyes, because he could not speak with the way his teeth chattered and scar seared in agony.

Could he understand his thoughts? Was Draco adept enough at Legilimency to understand what he was saying? Perhaps it did not matter; hopefully, Harry's pitiful disposition and pleading look was enough for him to get the message.

Harry wasn't able to stay present long enough to find out. He was yanked back into the Dark Lord's violent orbit, ripped from his own mind.

There was no help for it. Macnair was weak prey, a wounded, frightened creature, and he, Lord Voldemort, was a coiled snake, heady with bloodlust, tightly wound and needing to strike.

The Elder Wand felt triumphant in his hands as he raised it again, murder in his heart—

"Avada Kedavra!"

Green, exhilarating, awe-inducing green, the power—more, more, more—

A Promise

“Potter! Potter!”

Harry heard his name being shouted as though from the other end of a long, dark tunnel. It echoed oddly and felt so far away.

“Potter! Wake up!”

A bit less distorted, that time. And something was shaking him. *Someone* was shaking him, hard. Harry groaned, pushing—he didn’t want to be shaken, he wanted to sink back into the cool darkness he’d fallen into, on the other side of that long tunnel…

“No—wake UP!”

“OW!”

Harry was slapped back into reality—literally. Draco was standing over him, his arm raised, his ashen face full of determination and fright.

That expression broke when his eyes met Harry’s. Relief washed over his pale features, as well as his magic, which had been saturated with fear. “Thank fucking Merlin,” he breathed. He lowered his arm. “Thought I was going to have to do something drastic.”

“You slapped me!” Harry shouted, incredulous, for that seemed drastic to *him*. He must have slapped him really hard, too, because his skin stung. Harry gingerly touched his cheek.

“Yes, I did, and you’re welcome!” Malfoy shouted back. “You know what else I did? I practically carried your sorry, shaking arse back here, even as you were blacking out, groaning like you were dying, even as people were watching us—because you wanted to go to Diagon Alley for some mysterious fucking reason in the first place!”

Harry blinked, then looked around. They were back in the foyer of Malfoy Manor. He was sprawled on the ground in front of the fireplace.

“Ah,” Harry said as it all came back to him. “Right…”

He moved his hand from his stinging cheek to his forehead. His scar was no longer burning in pain.

“Thank you, Draco, for your quick and chivalrous rescue,” Malfoy drawled. Then, still glowering, he offered Harry his hand. He grimaced, then accepted Malfoy’s help so that he could stand.

“What…?” Draco started to ask a question once Harry was on his feet, but then seemed to lose his nerve.

Harry decided to answer what he was surely about to ask, anyway. “I… saw something. Something… sometimes I see what he’s, uh… what he’s doing. And that’s… why I get like that.”

Malfoy’s magic sparked with great interest, as well as trepidation. He waited patiently.

“And… I don’t know if I should tell you.”

Annoyance. It was clear in both Draco’s face and aura in a flash. “After all that? After dragging me around while you do Salazar knows what and make me whisk you away to get you back here, you—”

“It was bad,” Harry hissed, cutting him off. “And—well, you’ll find out soon enough, I reckon.”

Because it wasn’t like Voldemort would be able to keep the murder of not one, but two of his Death Eaters a secret for long.

“Then why not just tell me?” Malfoy countered.

Harry gnawed at his lower lip, considering him. Was it risky to tell him? Was he putting Draco in danger by letting him know what he saw?

Harry wasn’t entirely sure. Still, he felt the need to give him something, seeing as he had—as he’d so heatedly pointed out—dragged his sorry arse back here. “Someone… is dead,” he settled for. “Two someone’s, actually. And not—I don’t know, not people you’d want dead. I don’t think. Don't ask me for more, please, just—it’s bad, Malfoy.”

Harry swallowed hard, the echoes of Voldemort’s loss of control still lingering in his mind. “Really bad.”

“My… m-my parents?” Draco asked in a trembling whisper.

“What? No! No,” Harry said quickly. “Not them, my God, I wouldn’t be—just, no. But…”

“But who?” Draco asked at once, clearly unable not to. “Oh fuck, did he kill my aunt?”

Harry supposed he should have been concerned that his initial impulse to this was to say, ‘I wish.’ Instead he said, “No, not her either.”

“Then who? Who—”

“Quit asking!”

Harry took a few hasty steps backwards. The fact that his scar no longer hurt was becoming a different kind of cause for alarm to him. What was Voldemort doing now, after all that? Was he going to find someone else to torture and kill, and Harry would feel the sudden repercussions of it at any moment? Was he about to go on a complete rampage?

He didn’t know, but Voldemort had felt more than a little unhinged, and Harry wouldn’t be surprised. He also knew that he didn’t want to be around Malfoy again if that was going to be the case. “Just—go do whatever you want now, Malfoy,” Harry snapped as he continued to back away. “I’m done with you.”

Harry left, ignoring Draco’s stunned and incensed magic as he went. He was, at least, smart enough to let Harry go without further complaint.

Harry rushed to his room as quickly as he could. His heart pounded the whole time.

He raced through the halls, past the many staring portraits, and nothing happened.

He made it to his room and locked the door, casting a silencing charm around the space for good measure, and nothing happened.

He sat on the edge of his bed for a long time, waiting…

Nothing happened.

Harry did not feel so much as a tingle in his scar. That was a good thing, wasn’t it?

Maybe.

Harry dragged his hands down his face. Voldemort had… lost it. He

had lost it, pure and simple, high on his newfound power in the Elder Wand, and now Harry had no idea what to do about it—or even what to expect.

I should have gone to see if Ron and Hermione are awake, Harry thought morosely. Once upon a time, he had always confided in his two best friends when he'd been assaulted by visions from Lord Voldemort… They had always been there to help him make sense of it…

But even as he had that thought, Harry knew he wouldn't have burdened them with this. He tried to tell himself that it was because he was being chivalrous—they had enough on their minds at the moment, after all—but the real reason…

His face felt hot with shame. Truthfully, he didn't feel like admitting that he had so spectacularly and definitively lost the loyalty of the Elder Wand.

…Probably.

Who is the Master of the Master of the Elder Wand…?

Harry shook his head. He knew for certain that Voldemort was a—if not the only—true wielder of the Deathstick now, and that it had happened because he, Harry, had lost control himself.

No more Unforgivables…

Harry was at a total loss. He was running on fumes, far too exhausted to make any sense of what he should do. He couldn't turn to Ron and Hermione for help, not now, but…

But he could talk to someone.

Harry almost groaned out loud. He did not want to do this. He really, really did not want to do this.

He pulled the ring from his pocket and stared at it. Snape would know what to expect.

As loathe as Harry was to admit it, Severus Snape would likely have a great deal of insight into what the Dark Lord may be feeling right now, of what he may be doing or planning to do at this very moment. He was one of Voldemort's most trusted followers for a long time, after all; his knowledge of the Dark Lord's tendencies was, perhaps, second only to Bellatrix's…

That, and there was the added benefit (one might reasonably think 'horror') of Harry not needing to admit or explain anything to the ghost of Snape, because Snape, being tied to him already knew.

He knows everything I know, Harry lamented, yet again, with no small amount of despair. *He knows exactly how I almost killed Bellatrix, he knows what happened afterwards… He knows about… the courtroom…*

Face flaming, Harry put the ring back in his pocket. No way. He couldn't face Snape after that, he just couldn't.

Harry got to his feet, the uncontrollable urge to move gripping him. He felt horrible—jittery and sick and so tired, all at the same time. He wanted to do something productive, something good, but he had no idea what that should be. He felt nothing in his scar; he had no slight tremors of emotion in the back of his mind from Voldemort. He had nothing to go on, nothing.

Harry pulled the ring out again, reluctantly. He glared at it as though it had already begun making snide remarks in Snape's voice.

It may not really be him, Harry told himself. *This is probably just some very complex, old magic that makes it seem like a person who has died is sort of here again. But it's most likely just a projection, a manifestation of my own memories and feelings.*

Even though he really had no idea, this train of thought made Harry feel slightly better. It also gave him the courage to turn the ring about once in his hand, then twice, then…

Harry paused. "Don't make me regret this," he murmured, then turned it a third time.

There was a 'tsk' sound from behind him. Harry whipped around.

Snape—just as dead and semi-translucent as before—was a baffling sight to behold. Aside from being about as substantial as a ghost, he was not standing this time, but sitting. Or seemed to be sitting, at any rate, if such entities *could* sit. He was leaning back in the chair in front of the vanity, one leg propped lazily on his knee, one arm draped over the back of the chair. It was a very relaxed position, as though he had been lounging around in Harry's bedroom for hours, just waiting for him to show up.

His reflection did not appear in the mirror behind him.

“Potter,” he said curtly. “And here I thought you might never call upon me again.”

Harry tried not to glare. He gripped the ring tightly in his hand. “Should I not have bothered? Were you—I don’t know, busy or something?”

“As busy as one can be, being dead yet metaphorically tethered to life by a string… a string that is cruelly tied to the life of Harry James Potter.” He looked like he might smirk or say something much more insulting, but he didn’t. Instead he said, “What a predicament you’ve gotten yourself into.”

Harry wished his traitorous face would stop burning so badly. “Yeah,” he muttered. “Yeah, I know.”

“You have not taken my advice.”

“What advice? To be respectful? That hardly qualifies as advice.”

Snape let his propped leg fall so both his feet were on the ground, and he leaned forward. “Have you summoned me to ask for something more precise, then?” he asked. “Perhaps I would have given you more useful information before, but you let your emotions get the best of you before we could speak for more than a few minutes… unsurprisingly.”

Harry knew he was right. He had chucked the ring at him after he’d mentioned Neville, cutting their conversation woefully short.

“Sorry,” Harry muttered, though he didn’t really feel sorry at all. “Let’s not waste time now, then, You know what’s happened. I didn’t summon you for a lecture on the stupid, stupid choices, I’ve made, so —”

“On the contrary,” Snape said, cutting him off, “you have, I believe, managed to put yourself in a rather advantageous place at the moment.”

Harry stared, slack-jawed. It was the closest thing to praise that he had ever gotten from Snape. “I… have I?”

“Don’t let it go to your head. You’ve still made some colossal mistakes as well, Potter. Potentially losing the allegiance of the Elder Wand… The way that you—”

“I said no lecturing!” Harry shouted. He started to twirl the ring between his fingers anxiously. He could not handle hearing Snape list his many atrocities. “I know I shouldn’t have lost it like that. I know. But it’s like you said, what’s done is done, so… now what?”

The ghost of his ex-Professor was staring at him with vacant, eerie eyes. It was more than a little unnerving; Harry began to fidget more wildly with the ring.

“It is difficult to say,” Snape finally said.

“What!?” Harry threw his hands up, nearly flinging the ring across the room on accident. He tried to shove it on his finger afterwards—pointer finger, right hand—but it was too small. “That’s all you have! It’s difficult to say!?”

“That is not *all I have.* But no, I cannot give you the definitive answers to what you’ve been wondering. The Dark Lord has never been like he is now, and he has never been the true Master of the Elder Wand. I therefore do not know, with certainty, what he is doing at this moment… but I have my guesses.”

When he didn’t immediately explain, Harry almost tore his hair out. “Great, let’s hear them then,” he prodded. He tried the ring on another finger—left hand, pointer—but it still wouldn’t fit.

“He could, as you’ve speculated, be hunting for another victim," Snape began. "His bloodlust was wild, he could be searching for someone to put it to good use on… but I feel you would know by now if this was the case. He would have found someone, and you would have felt it.”

Harry nodded, agreeing with this. “I’m sure I would have." Right hand, middle finger—still just a bit too small to fit over his knuckle.

“I therefore think he is, instead, trying to… cool off, to put it simply. Coming down from a high of such dark magic can be uncomfortable. But there are ways to make it… less uncomfortable.”

“Such as?” Harry asked. Left hand, middle finger—nope. Still too tight.

“Various spells, enchantments that numb one’s mind and body,” Snape said. “I imagine he is trying these now… and I suspect that they may not satiate him. Not any longer, not like they once would have… not now that he has access to something vastly superior.”

He gave Harry an even eerier, more pointed look. “And… and what might that be?” Harry asked, hating that he already knew.

Left hand, ring finger. The ring fit perfectly. This instantly irked him, so Harry pulled it back off.

“I think you know exactly what I mean,” Snape said quietly.

Harry felt a wave of dizziness. He sat on the edge of his bed again, hoping not to simply pass out from being so overwhelmed and tired. "What do I do?” he asked as he stared at the ground.

“Don’t look so hopeless, Potter. This could be a good thing.”

“A good thing?” Harry angrily shoved the ring down on the middle finger of his right hand, forcing it over his knuckle and making it throb in protest. “How exactly—?”

Voldemort appeared in a sudden flash of black, torrential magic.

It happened so abruptly that Harry gasped and jumped to his feet at once, nearly falling over as he rushed to shove his hands in his pockets. Voldemort had appeared directly in front of his closed bedroom door, his magic whirling in a cloud of dark and saturated black.

“Harry,” he said. His voice was cool, collected.

Harry was stunned. Voldemort was standing as regally still as he usually did, but his magic was… God, it was *awful.* Toxically dark. Harry couldn’t even remember the last time it had been this bad.

“Yes, you can,” Snape’s voice supplied.

Harry about had a heart attack.

Oh fucking hell, he thought in terror. Voldemort was here, right here, and…

Snape wasn’t vanishing.

For his part, Snape had not reacted at all at the appearance of his former master in Harry’s room. And Voldemort—well, if Harry had wondered if anyone else could see manifestations of the ring before, he now had his answer. The Dark Lord clearly could not see his traitorous ex-pupil sitting there, not ten feet away in the bedroom with them, or he surely would have done… something.

Something besides look directly at Harry with only a mild glint of interest in his eyes, acting like he wasn't on the verge of exploding.

"Keep it together, Potter," Snape hissed. *Guess no one else can hear him, either,* Harry thought, *just me.* He felt so lucky. He also felt like he was going to vomit all over the carpet. "Respond."

It took a great deal of effort to not glare at Snape where he sat at the vanity. The stupid ring—why had he gone and forced it on his finger? He couldn't banish Snape if he couldn't get the bloody thing off!

"What are you doing here?" Harry grit out, trying to stealthily slide the ring off while in his pocket. He couldn't.

Voldemort gave him a deceptive, small smile. "I had a moment." He crossed the room in a few long strides until he was in front of Harry, then touched his chin, tilting Harry's face up. "Permission?"

Harry remained stunned. Voldemort was acting so convincingly normal, so unshaken, despite the horror of his magic.

"No, he isn't," Snape commented from his corner of the room. "His hand is shaking slightly. His pupils, they're dilated, and the whites of his eyes are bloodshot. He's not well. Call him out on it. Say—calmly, do not be hostile—the words, 'What did you do?'"

Harry wished he was able to respond with some choice words of his own to Snape directly, but he couldn't. He could only choose to listen to him or not.

So he did.

"What did you do?"

Voldemort's eyes—which were indeed bloodshot, he saw—twitched. And his hands *were* trembling slightly; Harry could feel it now, the way his thumb shook just barely against his chin. He didn't answer.

"Now tell him what you saw, what you felt," Snape instructed. "He already knows you are a poor Occlumens, that you feel his emotions when they are strong and that you see what he does at times. Let him know exactly how much his guard fell."

"Don't bother lying about it," Harry said. His heart was pounding; this felt wildly dangerous, and yet Snape said to do it… "I saw it. I saw what you were doing—not that I wanted to, mind. You, torturing

those two. That was Macnair and Rookwood, wasn't it? I felt it, I saw it, and—you tortured them and killed them, you *murdered* them, you —"

Harry hadn't been aware that he was trying to back away until Voldemort gripped his jaw, hard, stopping him from retreating. "They deserved it," he hissed, and it seemed he had no intention of denying anything. "They failed me."

"Because someone escaped?"

"Potter," Snape warned.

"Who was it?" Harry said, ignoring him. "Was it McGonagall? Did she get away from your little Death Eaters?"

Voldemort's expression became slightly less lethal. "McGonagall?" he repeated. He made a derisive sound. "Minerva Mcgonagall was released, as promised. She did not escape. She is free, but she is being closely monitored."

"Then who—?"

"That is not your concern, Harry," Voldemort interrupted. His magic was growing even darker, somehow. Then, in a calmer tone that was clearly forced, "I asked for permission."

"Don't give it to him."

Harry chanced a fleeting look towards Snape. He looked eager now, his face as animated and lively as Harry had seen it yet. "Say no. Don't explain."

Harry swallowed thickly. He knew at once that rejecting Voldemort right now was not going to go over well.

"I… no," he responded in a whisper.

Voldemort only looked surprised, like maybe he had misheard him. "No?" he repeated.

"No."

He did not immediately explode in a fit of rage like Harry had thought he would. Voldemort leaned in closer. "Why not, Harry? I'm asking nicely."

“Tell him no, it’s too soon, and you’re already exhausted,” Snape said. “All of which is true.”

And Harry knew that it was, but then—that was when it all clicked. Suddenly Harry was hit with what felt like a giant revelation, but he kept his emotions in check, and listened to Snape. “Because it’s only been a few hours,” he said. “And I’m already exhausted, so no. No, you can’t… you can’t have my soul right now. You can go.”

Harry nodded towards the door. Voldemort’s reaction to being denied *and* dismissed was instant.

Harry’s world blurred, swept off his feet as he was, and then he found himself slammed backwards, pinned against the headboard of his bed. Voldemort had his legs on either side of his waist, straddling him on the mattress and holding him captive there. His magic was dark and full of angry *want, want, want.*

Harry swallowed with difficulty under the pressure of Voldemort’s fingers. *Oh fucking hell*, Harry thought, his heart beating fast and hard against his rib cage. *I’m trapped on a bed under a violent Voldemort, and Snape is watching* everything. He might have described his situation as his worst nightmare, except Harry was certain that he never would have been able to conceive of such a horror before, not even in his darkest, wildest imagination.

“He’ll try being furious and intimidating, first,” Snape said—unnecessarily at this point, Harry thought. “Don’t let it shake you.”

“You should not deny me, Harry,” Voldemort said. His magic was a wall of heavy blackness surrounding him, pressing in on all sides. “I might make some more bad decisions if you do.”

“Don’t,” Harry snapped. Despite his hammering heart, he didn’t need Snape to tell him not to be shaken by Voldemort’s mercurial, violent tendencies—he was too used to them, and too exhausted besides. “Don’t threaten me. We both know you’re not going to hurt anyone I care about. But I suppose if you want to go off and kill some more of your own followers, I won’t stop you.”

“They deserved to die,” Voldemort seethed again, but Harry could sense it, the tinge of regret simmering in his aura. He hadn’t meant to kill Macnair and Rookwood, not really.

“I won’t disagree with that,” Harry said. “Doesn’t change what you did to yourself in the process, though. You played with strong, dark magic

for too long, and now you're paying the price. You want to feel some respite from the repercussions of your own choices? You can start by admitting them."

He laughed when Voldemort's eyes widened a fraction, when his magic spasmed in shock at Harry's audacity. "Do you even realize what a hypocrite you are?" Harry sneered, undeterred. "You just lectured me on using Unforgivables, you just told me all about how they hurt you, how they darken your soul… and then you go and use them for longer than I did, killing two of your own people, and now? Now you're dealing with the same consequences that anyone else would. Worse, probably, considering the state your broken soul is in to begin with. You feel bad. Why are you looking so surprised about all that? What, did you think you were the *exception?*"

Harry laughed again. Voldemort squeezed his throat tighter until he no longer could.

"Too much, Potter," Snape said tersely. "You have made your point."

Harry feared that the Dark Lord was going to throttle him until he was unconscious, but then his incensed expression cleared, shifting to something else. "Look at you, Harry," he crooned. "Suddenly such an expert on dark magic. I'll let you have that. You're right."

He released his chokehold. Harry could breathe again.

"I did use dark magic for longer than I should have, *strong* magic… It's easy to let that happen when one is very, very angry, as you well know. I can think of only two other times I have been so furious that I have lost control like that… both of which, perhaps unsurprisingly, had to do with you."

His bloodshot eyes went to Harry's scar. His black aura was brimming with such a great sense of longing that Harry was stunned that he was keeping himself in check at all.

"He won't for long," Snape said. "He is going to break inevitably. You need to control how. You need to keep this feeble armistice alive for as long as you can."

Harry wished he could ask how, precisely, he was supposed to do that. Voldemort brushed the hair from Harry's forehead, petting him the way he so liked to. He gently traced his thumb along Harry's scar. It was astonishing that he continued to resist igniting that connection between them, but for whatever reason, he seemed committed to

waiting, to not being the one to break their ‘feeble armitrice’, as Snape had put it.

“I… Did this one also have to do with me?” Harry asked.

“Indirectly,” Voldemort answered, his eyes still on Harry’s scar.

Harry wanted to ask what happened, who it was that escaped, but he knew he wouldn’t get an answer. “Sorry,” he found himself muttering instead.

“Mmm… I’m not.”

Something glinted in Voldemort’s otherwise purely black magic. “He’s going to try being seductive next,” came Snape’s voice.

Harry hated how accurate he was.

Voldemort’s mouth lowered to Harry’s ear. “I would kill anyone who fails me, where your safety is concerned,” he murmured.

Harry didn’t have time to dwell on exactly what that meant, because then Voldemort was running his tongue along skin, making him quiver involuntarily. “I’d do a thousand unspeakable, evil things in your name, Harry…”

He moved his lips to his neck. Harry was hyper-aware of how they were positioned on the bed, with his back against the headboard, Voldemort’s legs on either side of him. He did his best not to look at the mirror above the bed.

“And I’d do a thousand more unspeakable, evil things *to* you…”

He kissed his neck, gently. Harry couldn’t help it—his eyes fluttered to a close at the soft sensation, the deceptive, featherlight kiss that he knew preceded ones that would be far more demanding. Voldemort’s mouth went a little lower, and one of his hands, the one that was not carding through his hair, was on his chest.

“Potter.”

Harry’s eyes flew open. He had, for all of two seconds, managed to forget about Snape.

With the way Voldemort was now positioned, Harry had a clear view of him. Snape was sitting exactly as he was before, but his semi-translucent face was etched with something that resembled anger. “Do

not."

As it transpired, those words were somehow even more impactful when spoken by a dead Severus Snape. Harry's mind had no trouble filling in the rest of his statement:

Do not let him fuck you while I am forced to watch and witness you ruining everything in the most unspeakable, blasphemous manner.

Because it *would* ruin absolutely everything. After the morning's catastrophic events in Courtroom Ten, Harry was fairly certain that having sex with the Dark Lord equated to that light between them bursting to life, that connection igniting whether either one of them consciously wanted it to or not. Something Voldemort had obviously learned as well, which was why he was doing what he was doing, and his hand had gone lower still, and—

"No," Harry gasped as he kept his eyes—horrifyingly—locked onto Snape's. "Stop."

He wouldn't use the word 'lucky' to describe any part of what was happening to him, but Harry knew it was a good thing that having Snape's presence in the room was the biggest turn-off he'd ever experienced. With Voldemort's skilled tongue and hands, he surely would have caved otherwise.

But he didn't. Voldemort's body went rigid over him, his aura once more shaking in anger and confusion. "No?" he asked, keeping his tone low and velvety despite this. He kissed Harry's neck again, biting him in that way that, under normal circumstances, would have made Harry blush and forget himself… but with Snape watching, made him want to crawl under a rock and die.

"No," Harry repeated. "I'm exhausted. You… you can go."

There was a suspended moment of silence. Voldemort's aura was wild with emotions—lust, anger, and—mother of God, he was…

Wounded.

Deeply, if Harry was assessing that bitter blackness correctly. There was a terrible hollowness that accompanied the Dark Lord's typical windstorm of emotions, and Harry could only think that he was hurt. Honestly pained that he had been rejected.

It didn't last long. Soon Voldemort's aura was deepening with an

entirely new hue interwoven into the black, something like a dull blue-gray, making Harry think of a sky before a storm.

“Manipulation next,” Snape said. His dead eyes were hyper-focused, like he too could sense his former-master’s magic.

“Don’t say that,” Voldemort said.

Harry didn’t dare to breathe. The Dark Lord’s voice had taken on a totally new inflection, something rough and… broken. Harry had only ever heard him speak like this maybe once before, when he had repeated Harry’s own words back to him…

I’m sorry that you’ve lost that… I’m sorry that you became this… I’m sorry that you never knew love…

The Dark Lord buried his face into the crook of Harry’s neck, seeming so much smaller than he had moments before. For the first time, Harry noticed the smallest glimmer, a whisper of what threatened to be gold. “Don’t send me away like this, Harry… You alone can make it right, you can help…”

He took a shuddering breath, wrapping his arms around Harry’s waist.

“I *ache*,” he all but groaned, a glint like madness in his magic. He leaned his head into Harry’s neck affectionately, speaking softly against his throat. “But *you* can save me.”

Some deep, primal part of Harry’s consciousness stirred, followed immediately by a plethora of other, much more rational, feelings. He wasn’t lying—Voldemort’s aura was a blue-black, yawning hole, as cold and as dark as it was before he’d ever touched upon Harry’s, but infinitely more desperate. He was in pain. He was needy.

“He is weak,” came Snape’s voice, interrupting Harry’s thoughts. “This is the weakest he has ever been. You can use this, Potter.”

How? Harry thought, but couldn’t say.

Snape went on, anyway. “He is going to get what he wants from you no matter what, so now is the time. Make a demand. If he wants your soul, he has to pay for it.”

Harry stared, baffled despite how logical that all was. Voldemort was trembling over him, waiting for his response.

Ask for what? Anything Harry could think of seemed either too small or far too grand.

“He demanded that you no longer use Unforgivables, considering what they do to your soul,” Snape said. “Why not demand the same…?”

Harry tried to imagine that. Lord Voldemort, never casting a Cruciatus Curse or a Killing Curse ever again. Or an Imperius Curse, for that matter. Would he ever agree to that…?

No. Not a chance, Harry thought.

“There is an excellent chance,” Snape disagreed. “Be smart. Be respectful. Appeal to him and his power. You know him, Potter. You know what he likes to hear. You can do this. Just control your emotions.”

Harry physically bit his tongue at that remark, keeping his eyes squeezed shut as he drew in a breath. It wasn’t easy to *control his emotions* when he was pressed up against the headboard, that possessive aura wrapping around him like a cocoon.

Voldemort’s face started grazing against his cheek like the world's most deranged house cat demanding affection, waiting for an answer. “I… I know I can,” Harry said, responding to both Snape and Voldemort. He didn’t feel it was wise to point out, yet again, that Voldemort had done this to himself.

“Then why deny me?” Voldemort had clearly tried and failed to keep his voice calm any longer; it was sharp, impatient. He was in a perilous state—if Harry said one wrong word, things could, and would, go disastrously wrong.

Harry opened his eyes. In the background of his nightmarish life, Snape sat there, haunting him.

“Don’t give him direct orders. Make him come to realize that it is a reasonable request himself.”

Oh, so simple, Harry thought angrily. He wrapped his arms around Voldemort’s neck in a gesture that would seem bold and loving to an outsider, but was really just a way for him to try and get the ring off where Voldemort couldn’t see. Snape was helpful, but his presence was also mortifying, and—well, he didn’t like the idea of Voldemort seeing his broken horcrux on his finger.

It still wouldn't budge. "I… won't. I won't deny you," Harry said. "But only if you promise me something."

Voldemort lifted his head to look at him. His face was unreadable, but his dark magic was singing with feelings ranging from need to sorrow and everything in between. "A promise," he repeated.

"Yes. I want you to… I think that you…"

Harry's voice trailed off, uncertainty crippling him. How was he supposed to word this?

"Just spit it out, Potter, he is losing his faculties," Snape said.

"I want you to—to not use Unforgivable curses," Harry said in a rush.

Voldemort's brows rose and his bloodshot eyes widened. Then he smiled. "Do you now," he murmured. He looked like he was going to laugh.

For whatever reason, this nearly made Harry lose his mind. Rage flared in his heart, uncontainable.

"This *isn't* funny!"

He shoved at Voldemort's chest with the hand that did not have the ring on it; predictably, Voldemort did not budge. "You think I'm being cute or something with that request? You think I'm making a little joke? I'm not. I've never been more serious. You—you don't even realize it, but it's pretty clear you're about to fall apart at the seams. You're shaking. You've hidden it better than I could, but you are. And your eyes are messed up, and you—you're cold, you're aching, and when you're like this—you're not going to have any self-control, once it starts; you'll get a taste of what having an unbroken soul is like and you'll lose it, you'll suck me dry and hurt me and do whatever you want to me and you won't stop until—"

"*No*."

Voldemort grabbed Harry's face with both hands. His magic gleamed with that gray-blue again, and his expression looked nearly panicked. Twisted, tortured.

"No, no, no," Voldemort said again, but his voice was much softer. He let his forehead fall against Harry's, keeping his hold on his face tight. "No, I will not."

“Yes, you will,” Harry said. “Don’t lie to me. There’s no way you’re going to be able to keep yourself in check, not when you’re like this. You’re in a bad way right now. You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t, only hours later.”

“I can control—”

“Just stop!” Harry yelled. Snape didn’t voice his disapproval, so he kept going. “ It’s… it’s okay. Well, no, it’s not okay, but—but I’ll… I can deal with it. I’ll… let you.”

Voldemort’s eyes went wide again. “What?”

“I’ll let you. You can do... You can take whatever you want. You will anyway. But, what I’m saying is—I’m telling you it’s okay. I’ll let you. I won’t fight you, you can take whatever you need, you have my… permission… but… just promise me. Swear to me you won’t do this again, that you won’t become this again. Please.”

Voldemort’s magic was going absolutely mad. It was enough to make Harry feel dizzy, and yet…

He wasn’t saying no.

“It’s not like you need them,” Harry pressed on. *Could this possibly work?* “You’re the Dark Lord, you can torture people in a million more creative ways than by using that curse… and you can kill with just as many more. You don’t need to use the same spells that… that darken your soul like this. Look what they can do—what they did to me, what they’ve done to you. You’re—you’re just—you’re terrifying when you’re like this, and it’s me you’ll come to, every time, it will always be me who pays for it, and it’s…”

It’s just not fair, he thought, but Harry’s voice broke off before he could say it. Words he’d thought so many times, but never said out loud.

Voldemort didn’t speak for a long time. His eyes searched Harry’s face, his magic whirling in terrible ways.

“And how would it make you feel, Harry, if I agreed?”

“I—what?”

“If I agreed to never use such magic again… for you… only for you… How would that make you feel?” Voldemort lifted his head, his lips grazing Harry’s forehead when he said, “Would that make you feel

powerful?"

"I… Yes," Harry said anyway, his voice hoarse.

Voldemort's magic brightened just a hair. He kissed Harry's forehead, right on his scar. "Mmm," he hummed, a sound like he was tasting something sweet. Another kiss. "I will… *refrain*… for you, my light."

He kissed his scar again and again, unnervingly softly.

Harry was buzzing with disbelief. He had really agreed…

Maybe he was just saying what Harry wanted to hear, maybe he was lying… but…

Harry wrapped both arms around Voldemort's neck again, and when he looked beyond him he once more made eye contact with Snape.

Snape, who was staring right at him, smirking. He inclined his head slightly, a small, mocking bow. He didn't say anything, but his expression looked almost proud, if also a little smug.

Then he vanished.

Harry barely stopped himself from gasping out loud. *That absolute fucker,* he thought. *He could have vanished whenever he wanted!*

Harry managed to finally yank the ring off his finger. It was a good thing Voldemort was currently obsessed with kissing his forehead and petting his hair, otherwise he might have noticed. Harry dropped it back into his pocket. He really needed to figure out a way to hide the thing properly.

He didn't have any time to dwell on how he might do that now, though. Voldemort moved his mouth to Harry's ear again, running his tongue along it before kissing his neck, and…

I'm scared, Harry realized.

He was. Harry was frightened now in a way that he hadn't allowed himself to be yet. Because he didn't want to do this. He didn't want to let Voldemort assault him when he was in this state, when he was desperate and wild with need. Especially now, with Harry's permission, he was not going to try and be gentle, he would not practice any restraint whatsoever… His magic would be cold and toxic and horrific, and Harry didn't want it, didn't want to suffer through it

and be left so weak afterwards, completely drained…

But he had to. If it meant there was even a chance that the Dark Lord wouldn't use that kind of dark magic again… that he wouldn't wield the Deathstick while casting such powerful curses, and therefore wouldn't lose himself like that again…

Because next time, it might not be his Death Eaters he wants to punish. It could be someone he cared for, someone he loved. Or even someone else who simply didn't deserve to face his irrational wrath.

Harry could do this.

"O-okay," he said, and he hated how he stuttered with the one word, sounding as scared as he felt. He didn't trust himself to say anything else, so he didn't. Harry closed his eyes and waited.

Voldemort's aura tensed, whirling in black and deep blue, but nothing happened. Harry felt like he was standing on a very high ledge, waiting to be pushed off.

"You do it."

Voldemort's voice was barely a whisper. Harry opened his eyes to see his red eyes intense upon him.

"What?"

"You do it. You… initiate it. You control it. I won't take more than you give."

Harry let out a harsh, involuntary laugh. "Yes you will. Of course you will. You won't be able to—"

"I *won't*!"

Voldemort's magic lashed out. The whole room shook; the furniture danced precariously and the mirror above the vanity snapped with a sharp *ping*, a long crack now dividing it in half.

Harry jolted beneath him at the outburst, but Voldemort pulled back, reeling his magic in. He still had Harry's face in his hands, one on his cheek while the other remained locked in his hair. "I will control myself," he vowed, his gaze fierce.

Harry didn't believe it, not for a second.

“Okay,” he said regardless. “I’ll… I can do it.”

Voldemort nodded, looking appeased. He kissed Harry’s forehead again.

This is worse, Harry thought as he took a few steadying breaths. Before, it had felt like he was waiting to be pushed from that cliff. Now it was as though he had to willingly walk off of it himself.

But he could do this. He would.

Harry closed his eyes… and the light bloomed.

A flicker at first. The smallest tendril of warmth. Voldemort melted into it, his body going pliant on top of Harry, almost moaning in satisfaction.

It was peaceful, sweet.

It was short-lived.

Between one heartbeat and the next, everything fell apart. Voldemort’s magic blackened in a swift and perilous way, full of that familiar, toxic want, that need for more, more, *more*—

Harry was immediately lost. It hardly mattered that he had expected it, nothing could prepare him for the horror of feeling the Dark Lord’s broken soul, of being clung to and drained of everything he had. Voldemort’s hands were on his face, on his chest, pushing the collar of his shirt aside… He had pulled his body from the headboard, had him laid flat on his back on bed where he loomed over him… He was moaning and his mouth was on Harry’s neck…

Too much, too much, Harry thought over and over. In some far away place in his mind, he knew that he had agreed to this, had given permission, but he would take it back now if he could. The sensations were overwhelming—that sharp, bitter cold flowing in his veins while at the same time that light burned across his skin.

It slowed. The sensations all lessened, becoming nearly bearable—but then that frigid want was back in full force, and Harry lost his breath.

“I… can’t,” Voldemort said, his voice a broken groan. He had torn Harry’s shirt, opening it so that he could place his hands on his chest. The skin contact made everything so much worse for Harry, but for Voldemort…

It's too much.

"I can't… Harry…"

Voldemort tore his face away from his neck just long enough to look at him. His eyes were glassy, unfocused, and tormented. "I can't…"

Then he was kissing him, his lips hot against his. His mouth was demanding, his tongue pushing in and diving deep, that light growing so hot it was painful, burning…

Harry could have tried to end things, he knew it, but he didn't. Wouldn't. He had given permission. And he didn't think he would be able to stop it now, anyway. He was lost in the undertow of Voldemort's desires now, and it was all he could do to not drown.

Harry…

Voldemort's voice rang in his mind, in his soul. It was like dry ice, burning and cold and it *hurt*.

It was bliss, it was beautiful agony.

It was too much for him to handle. Harry's chaotic world was dimming; Voldemort's palm was pressed over his heart, scalding him.

I'm sorry…

Harry wasn't sure if he'd really heard those words or if he'd just imagined them. He felt like he was floating and sinking at the same time, those opposing sensations clashing within him. The darkness was closing in, fast.

Harry looked up, catching their reflections unwittingly in the mirror over the bed. Voldemort had gone back to ravishing his neck, and his shirt was torn completely open now, leaving his chest bare… Voldemort still had one hand on Harry's sternum, over his scar…

Harry knew this would happen—he *knew* what Voldemort was going to do, knew that he was going to lose all control and attack him like this. That was why he had said he would allow it, to 'control how', as Snape had instructed… It wasn't a surprise that this was happening, not at all, and yet…

And yet Harry's last thought before the darkness claimed him was, *Why am I crying?*

Family Meeting

Chapter Notes

Big thanks to eleven_eaves for beta reading this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry was in the sea.

The water was warm and the current lazy, keeping him afloat as he drifted on his back. Above him the sky was dark, moonless. Stars glittered like a thousand pieces of broken glass.

They fell from the sky.

First one, then more. The stars came down in a cascade, bringing the darkness with them; the sky itself wrapped around Harry's shoulders and waist where he was suspended in the water, seeping into his skin, and—

Voldemort.

He was holding him. He was every broken, fallen star; he was the swathing night.

Harry's senses slowly awoke. He felt Voldemort's arms around him, his fingers in his hair while his other hand traced circles on his back. When Harry breathed in, he inhaled the indescribable scent of him.

He was shaking him, gently. He was…

"Harry."

It was strange, hearing his name. The urgency with which Voldemort said it told him that it wasn't the first time he'd tried to rouse him. Harry attempted to open his eyes, to move at all, and was unsurprised to learn that he couldn't.

"Harry."

Voldemort's magic twisted in worry. It was *loud,* Harry thought, and irritating, and he just wanted to go back to that welcoming, warm ocean and float...

Harry.

In his head, this time, and infinitely clearer.

Drink.

A rim was pressed to his lifeless lips. Harry inhaled the metallic coldness of the elixir. It reminded him quite a bit of what Voldemort *used* to smell like. Blood and ice.

Drink, and you can rest.

His head was tilted back, and the liquid was tipped into his mouth. Harry feared he might choke, but his body reacted on its own—he swallowed without conscious effort, one gulp, then another.

The rush that followed was particularly odd. A wave of something powerful rolled through his body, but his mind stayed as foggy as before.

Voldemort's magic relaxed. He must have put the cup down, for he resumed petting Harry's hair.

Harry still couldn't open his eyes, but Voldemort's magic was clear to him. Once the panic and subsequent relief dissipated, it swelled with something new, something far heavier.

Guilt.

He feels bad, Harry realized numbly. Which he should, as any normal person would, but…

But this was not a normal person. Lord Voldemort felt bad, *really* bad, about doing something he had been given permission to do. About taking what he continually claimed was rightfully his…

Harry hadn't expected it, but there was no denying it. The guilt in Voldemort's magic was so overbearing Harry thought it might crush him.

It's okay, he wanted to say. He couldn't yet focus well enough to understand why it felt so important that he say that, only that it did. It felt like the most important thing in the world.

It's okay, I already forgave you.

But there was no light thrumming between them any longer, and Voldemort's mind was already closed off again after commanding that he drink. Harry's thoughts could not reach him.

He tried instead to speak out loud, but he knew it was no good. His mind slipped, falling back to unconsciousness.

Back to the waves.

"Drink."

Voldemort again.

He was easier to hear, now.

Harry's lips parted obediently as the elixir was poured into his mouth. Voldemort's magic glistened with approval, then returned to its softly undulating cloud of guilt and worry.

Harry nearly succumbed to the sea of warmth again the moment he swallowed.

No. Have to tell him. I…

He put forth all of his energy into opening his mouth. With the way Voldemort was holding him, Harry knew he couldn't see his face, the way his features might have shown a hint of frustration. The back of Harry's head was against his chest, where Voldemort had his arms around his shoulders and—naturally—in his hair. They must have been laying down, now.

It's okay.

He couldn't speak. He couldn't open his eyes. He couldn't do anything.

Perhaps Voldemort sensed *some* kind of change in Harry, though, because his magic stirred oddly, and he pulled Harry tighter against his chest. One of his hands found Harry's, and he lifted his arm. Harry felt the press of his lips on his wrist.

It's okay, Harry tried again to say, and again he failed. *It's okay.*

He couldn't speak, but Harry finally managed something. When Voldemort lowered his wrist, his fingers grazed Harry's, and so Harry seized them.

He hadn't consciously decided to do so; perhaps it was some innate response honed from years of snatching snitches out of the air that not even exhaustion could stifle. Harry grabbed hold of Voldemort's hand

and held it, not with any amount of real force, but it was enough.

Voldemort's writhing magic froze.

It's okay, Harry thought as he kept hold of him. It was not easy. *It's okay. I already forgave you.*

Voldemort couldn't have possibly heard his thoughts, but he must have understood, because his black magic warmed with something like rosiness. Gold glinted in the darkness, growing brighter.

That's right, Harry thought, feeling delirious and still uncertain why, exactly, getting Voldemort's magic to shift felt so monumental just then. If he had anything left, he was sure he'd be smiling. *Everything is okay. It's going to be…*

The waves pulled him back. Voldemort threaded his fingers through Harry's as his world dimmed, his magic sparkling ever brighter, disarmingly beautiful with what Harry suspected was much greater than fondness.

The next time he awoke, Harry was shocked. Voldemort was no longer there. He sensed a different aura before him, not touching him. One that was vastly different yet nonetheless… familiar.

Yellow. Soft, friendly.

This is the person that healed me before.

The cup was pressed to his lips. Harry tried yet again to open his eyes, to see who this enigmatic witch or wizard was, but still could not.

The rim was pushed more urgently against his mouth. Harry drank because he knew he had to; the metallic taste of the elixir once more flowed through him.

Who are you? Harry wondered. He tried and tried to look, but it wasn't enough.

He fell back into a dark and peaceful sleep.

When Harry next drifted back to consciousness, he was alone.

No black and glinting gold aura of Lord Voldemort. No soft and welcoming yellow.

He *finally* managed to open his eyes, slowly. All he had for company now was his own reflection looking blearily down at him: a disheveled Harry Potter half-covered in a blanket, his hair a mess, his red eyes still hazy with the remnants of sleep.

He sat up. He felt… okay.

Not great, he thought as he stretched his arms above his head and yawned theatrically. *But not awful.*

He'd certainly had worse, at least.

He checked the time. It was a little after two. With no small amount of ire, he wondered how much time he'd missed. A day? Two? More?

Harry shook his head and focused. He'd been given the elixir… three times, he recalled, while incapacitated. Twice by Voldemort himself, and once by that mysterious yellow person. Did that mean he'd missed three days?

Unless Voldemort tried forcing more elixir into me than usual, he thought. *Maybe he hoped it would make me recover faster…*

He was bound to find that out soon enough. What Harry *really* wanted to know was who did Voldemort trust so implicitly, to allow them to be alone with Harry? To heal him, to see him at his most vulnerable—to pour the Elixir of Life down his throat when he was so weak he couldn't even open his eyes?

Harry hadn't a clue.

He pushed himself off the bed. Harry first checked his pockets—the ring was still there, as was his wand and his cloak. He next looked towards the bedside table, where he spotted a scroll.

Harry wasn't exactly surprised by that. He imagined it was going to explain what lie he was to tell everyone this time, for being practically comatose for however long.

Feeling anxious, Harry unfurled it. The parchment was thicker than the last note he'd left him, and…

Oh.

It wasn't a note at all, and the handwriting was unfamiliar. Harry's eyes scanned what he now realized to be a list. A list of names.

A list of those who are currently imprisoned in Azkaban.

Harry's pulse picked up as he read, stunned. It was not nearly as long as he might have imagined. There were less than fifty names total, and it included the dates of when they had been imprisoned, their crimes, their sentences…

Two names immediately stood out: Pomona Sprout and Filius Flitwick. They had both been placed in Azkaban the day after the Battle of Hogwarts…

And now—if this document was to be believed—they had been released. As of Sunday, June 14th, despite a supposed life sentence for treason. Sentences that had never been publicized, Harry knew… No one even knew they *were* in Azkaban with certainty before; they had been given no trials, just like McGonagall…

Harry sunk into a seated position on the edge of his bed, feeling light-headed.

Flitwick and Sprout were out; they were alive, they were okay…

Looking again through the list by the release dates, Harry came across one other individual who had been set free on June 14th: Hestia Jones. Harry had to wrack his brains for a moment before it came to him. Hestia Jones was an auror—one of the members of his guard who had escorted him from Privet Drive in his fifth year… and years later, she had returned to take the Dursleys to a safe location… with Dedalus Diggle, he recalled…

Harry did not see Diggle on the list of the imprisoned at all, nor did any other names seem familiar to him. The rest of the incarcerated had been sentenced to Azkaban years prior to the Second Wizarding War.

Harry lowered the parchment. Voldemort had not only given him the list he'd demanded, but had *released three people* —the ones he knew that Harry would have demanded he set free.

Why? Why not hold it over my head a bit longer, use it against me somehow…?

But Harry already knew why.

Is this my life, from now on? he wondered as he set the list back on his bedside table. Unlike the note Voldemort had once left for him, it did

not burst into flames. *Voldemort does something terrible to me, I forgive him, and so he does something… nice? To apologize, to try and make it right?*

Harry rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, not yet lucid enough to understand his own feelings about it all. He knew this was monumental, this… gesture. And he was glad they were out, he *was, and yet* he didn't feel like celebrating. He felt like screaming into his pillow, or crying in the shower perhaps, or maybe drinking all of the Malfoy family's finest alcohol. And while he had a dozen questions in his mind, what he really wanted to know was what fucking day it was now, if they had all been released on the 14th.

Pop.

"Master Potter is awake!"

Binny looked pleased and relieved to see Harry conscious. Before Harry could say a word, he flicked his wrist, and a tray filled with food and tea appeared.

And *that* had a powerful effect. Harry was gripped with hunger, and suddenly all his other problems in life seemed to vanish. It was just Harry Potter and the buttered bagel he was about to inhale, as well as everything else Binny had brought him.

By the time he'd eaten his fill and was sipping on his tea, Harry felt substantially more human. "Would you be liking more to eat, Master Potter?" asked Binny, looking at Harry as though very proud of him.

"No," said Harry. "Binny, what… What day is it?"

Binny did not seem surprised at his question. "It is Monday, Master Potter."

Monday.

It was still a blow to learn that he'd lost… how much time? What was left of Saturday after he'd returned from Diagon Alley with Draco, as well as *all* of Sunday, and…

He glanced at the grandfather clock. It was a quarter till eight.

"Is it morning?" Harry asked, hating that he couldn't tell. *This cursed room with its lack of windows.* "Or night?"

“Morning, sir.”

Nearly nine in the morning on a Monday. When was the last time he’d been given the elixir? Had that yellow-aura person been in his room very recently, or did he need to take it again soon? Seeing as there was no cup filled with glowing red liquid next to his scroll of the imprisoned, Harry assumed the former. It seemed Voldemort had tried forcing additional doses on him…

Pity that it didn’t seem to have helped.

It was *Monday.*

Could be worse, Harry lied to himself as he sipped his tea, grateful for the excuse to not speak. *I could have lost* more *time…*

“Binny is understanding, sir,” said Binny. “Magical instability is taking a great toll. Binny has seen it.”

“Magical what now?”

Binny refilled his teacup with another twitch of his wrist. “It is being what happened to you,” he said, and while Harry was certain his face belied just how confused he was, Binny didn’t seem to find that odd, either. “It is normal, not remembering. Sometimes it is happening to wizards and witches, sir, especially after bad things is happening. Their’s magic is being too unstable, and they is needing to recover. It was happening to Master Malfoy, when—”

He abruptly stopped talking as he ran, headfirst, into the wall.

“NO!” he shouted between bangs, “BINNY IS A BAD—!”

“Binny, stop!”

Instantly, he did. Binny slumped to his side and began rubbing at his forehead. “Binny should not be speaking of such things,” he mumbled. “Binny is sorry, Binny is—”

“It’s okay. Please don’t hurt yourself again. I mean—don’t hurt yourself again. I command it.”

Binny sniffled and nodded.

“You don’t… no need to tell me about what happened to Lucius,” Harry went on, though he thought he knew. He imagined that Lucius went through quite an ordeal after he’d been tortured by the Dark

Lord for so long. “But… magical instability?”

“Yes,” said Binny, still rubbing his head. “It is rare, but it is not unknown. That is what—what the D-dark Lord is explaining about what is happening to you. You was pushing your magic too hard, sir, and needed rest.”

Magical instability. What a load of absolute rubbish, Harry thought heatedly. *So* this *is the lie we're going with, today. That I had some kind of magical breakdown all on my own and needed a nice two day lie-down.*

Fury licked up Harry’s spine, but he did nothing but nod politely and sip more of his tea. It wasn’t the *worst* cover story he could come up with; it wasn’t as if Voldemort could continually explain away Harry’s absence by saying he was merely ‘feeling ill’. And if Binny's vague explanation was anything to go on, it sounded like something that would logically happen to him, given recent events.

It was infuriating nonetheless. Harry was in that state because of *Voldemort’s* weakness, *Voldemort’s* lack of control, not his own.

“Is Master Potter needing anything else?” Binny asked.

“No, thank you, Binny.”

Binny bowed then vanished, taking everything but the tray and Harry’s teacup with him.

Harry drank slowly. He glanced at the list of names, which had curled back into a loose scroll, unable to grasp the magnitude of it. He chose to stare at the clock instead, watching the second hand tick slowly round and round.

Then, as though struck by lightning, he jumped to his feet. *Perhaps Ron and Hermione are here.* He set his cup down, checked once more that he had the ring, his wand, and his cloak in his pockets, and took off at a near run as he fled his room. He ignored the disgruntled sounds that the portraits made—he was growing quite accustomed to their sneers when he dared to dash through the manor’s glorious halls—and while he headed for Ron’s room, he found he didn’t have to go that far.

Ron was in the dining hall where Harry usually had breakfast with the Malfoys, doing exactly that.

He could not have looked more uncomfortable.

It was almost comical, Harry thought, as he silently observed the scene before making his presence known. Breakfast was clearly over, as there was no food left on the table, and it was now time for tea and general lounging. Lucius was reading *The Daily Prophet;* Narcissa was flipping through some magical magazine Harry did not recognize but looked to be about interior design; Draco was engrossed in something that was about quidditch. Ron sat as far away from them as he could, and he was checking his watch when Harry finally cleared his throat and stepped into the room.

"Harry!"

Ron rushed over to him. Behind him, the Malfoys' magic all gleamed in various degrees of surprise.

"Morning," Harry said. "Where—?"

"How are you feeling?" Ron asked, cutting him off. "Blimey, you've been out for a while. Hermione's been sick with worry. I mean, me too, but you know how she gets—"

"I'm fine, I'm great. Where is she?"

Ron's magic turned a sour shade of red-yellow. "Er… she's, uh. She's here. Working."

"She's having her very first Occlumency lesson with my aunt as we speak," Draco elaborated from where he sat. He gave Harry a frosty smile and raised his cup towards him. "Welcome back," he drawled, then resumed reading.

"She's training with Bellatrix? *Right now?"* Harry gasped.

Ron nodded grimly. "Yeah… I wish I could stay, I do, but I have to go, I…" He checked his watch again, looking miserable. "I have to go now. If I'm late…"

"It's okay," Harry said. "Go. I'll see you when you're done. I'll—I'm here, now."

He gave Ron the most bracing smile he could manage. He could tell, both by Ron's expression and withering magic, that he was not reassured.

"You sure you're okay, mate?" he asked quietly—as though they could have anything resembling a private conversation then. "Magical

instability…? First I'm hearing of that, but *this* lot says it's real, and bad…"

Harry almost laughed at the way he jerked his head slightly towards the Malfoys when he said *them*. "Yeah," he lied, hating that he had to do so to Ron. *Again*. "Yeah, it's real, and uh, it was bad. But I'm okay. Just needed to recover. I'm right as rain now, I swear."

Ron continued to eye him suspiciously. "Are you *sure?* Because—"

"Tik tok, Weasley," Lucius murmured, his eyes never leaving the *Prophet*.

Ron shot Lucius a glare, but then nodded. "I have to go, really. Just… be careful. Take it easy, yeah? I can't—we can't keep losing you, Harry."

There was an awful moment where Harry thought he might burst into tears. He didn't. Ron grabbed him and sort of shook him, a confusing gesture that was somewhere between a hug and a bracing clap on the shoulder, then left, heading towards the foyer where the floo was.

The moment he was gone, Harry rounded on Draco. "Where are they?" he demanded. "Hermione and Bellatrix, what room are they in, where—?"

"Harry."

Narcissa folded her magazine in half and set it down. "You can't interrupt them. I'm sorry. She will be fine. Now, sit, please."

While her tone was nothing but polite, there was a sharpness to it that set Harry on edge. Her magic sharpened, too, a piercing blue that said, *This is not open for debate*.

Reluctantly, Harry joined them at the table. Narcissa smiled, and her magic softened.

"How are you feeling?" she asked—much more calmly than Ron had. "I instructed Binny to bring you food the moment you woke up; did you eat? Are you still hungry? Would you like any tea, anything at all…?"

"Er. No, I'm fine. I mean, he did, yes, and I don't need anything else. I'm feeling… great."

“I’m so glad to hear it.” Narcissa took Harry’s hand and squeezed it. “I haven’t experienced instability of that nature myself, but I’ve witnessed it. Your friend is quite right with his advice. Treat yourself gently today, and you’ll be back to your usual self in no time.”

Harry hedged a look at Lucius, whose magic—as well as Draco’s—had become cold and stagnant. One never would have guessed by their outward appearances, though. They both kept their heads down, reading and drinking tea, as though Lucius had not suffered torture from Lord Voldemort for an unholy amount of time, as though nothing dire and demented had ever happened in the lovely manor at all.

It was only then, as Narcissa smiled at him in a motherly way, that he remembered. Draco had told her that he, Harry, had tortured her sister… She knew that he’d lost himself completely; perhaps that was why she thought he’d become *unstable*…

And yet she didn’t look at him with any less fondness.

Binny appeared with another *pop*. “For you, Mistress,” he said, lifting up a small pile of more magazines.

Narcissa released Harry’s hand and took them, grinning as she did. “Oh good,” she said. “Here, Harry, I asked Binny to get this one for you. I thought you might find it interesting, but. Well, I couldn’t foresee the headline…”

She handed him a copy of *The Quibbler*. The headline read, *BLUE-SKINNED BLOXIES: CAUGHT ON FILM AT LAST*. Accompanying it was a photograph where a small, fairy-like creature zoomed in and out of the frame so quickly it could hardly be seen.

Harry accepted it with a frown. “What’s a blue-skinned bloxy…?”

“Haven’t the faintest clue,” Narcissa said.

Harry wasn’t sure if he should smile or not. Everything that was going on in the world, and *The Quibbler* was still printing articles about creatures that likely didn’t exist. *At least it’s not more propaganda about the Dark Lord,* Harry thought darkly. There was quite enough of that these days.

Thinking only that Luna would be pleased if he acted like he knew about blue-skinned bloxies, Harry half-heartedly skimmed the article while wondering when he’d be able to sneak off and find Hermione. He learned that bloxies, allegedly, liked to steal jewelry, particularly

silver, and that was enough on the topic for him.

Harry was much more interested in what *Lucius* was reading. He snuck glances at the *Prophet,* where a far bolder headline declared, *GRINGOTTS SECURITY REACHES NEW PEAK OF IMPENETRABILITY*. Harry was relieved that there was no snapshot of him and Draco there.

Did he tell them? Harry side-eyed Draco next, who was once more immersed in his Quidditch-related magazine. *Did he tell his parents about how we went to Diagon Alley, alone…? About how I blacked out, about…*

Harry's heart skipped a beat. *Do they know about Rookwood and Macnair yet? Does* anyone?

Harry immediately surmised that no, Draco hadn't told them, and no —no one knew. Everyone's magic was far too calm, and not even the older Malfoys, who were masters at *compartmentalizing,* would be so nonchalant if they'd learned that Voldemort had recently murdered *two* fellow Death Eaters.

They didn't know.

And Harry had only told Draco that two people were dead; he hadn't told him who, or even that they were followers of the Dark Lord. Draco clearly had decided—wisely, Harry thought—to keep that vague information to himself, for now… as well as their entire outing.

Thank Merlin, Harry thought, relaxing slightly. He also would rather that excursion remain secret. It hadn't exactly gone to plan, after all, and he didn't need anyone knowing he'd had a chat with Ollivander or anything else. Besides, it wasn't like Voldemort could keep the deaths of Rookwood and Macnair a secret forever, could he? He was probably contriving some cover story now, and once he came up with that, Harry could pretend to go along with it, and—

Narcissa's magic spiked with a sudden, tumultuous shock.

Harry noticed the shift in her demeanor before Draco or Lucius. She was clutching a new magazine very tightly in both hands; Harry saw that it was the newest issue of *Witch Weekly*.

She ripped it open. Harry watched, with no small amount of horror, what she must have just seen on the front cover.

There, in the corner, amongst several other seemingly scandalous sub-headlines, was a picture that took Harry's breath away.

Oh, fuck.

Narcissa's eyes darted across what Harry knew might be one of the more damaging articles ever written about him. Worse still, this one was also about Draco.

Her magic turned a perilous shade of black. Harry hid his face behind the *Quibbler* if only to feign ignorance for one last, blessed moment.

"Lucius… Draco. *Harry."*

Both Draco and Lucius reacted to that—Narcissa speaking in a voice that was much too sweet to mean anything good. "Family meeting, right now."

Without any further explanation, she stood, walking briskly away. She didn't wait for them to follow, but it was immediately clear they were meant to do so, *right this instant.*

"What—what happened?" Draco asked, looking at his father.

But Lucius was already on his feet, and while his magic was stirring with unease, he didn't hesitate to follow his wife. Which Harry found a bit shocking. He wouldn't have been surprised if Lucius simply dashed to the foyer to escape. "I suspect we shall find out promptly," he said drily. "Come, you heard her."

Draco stood, so Harry did as well. They walked side by side, behind Lucius. Further down the hall, Narcissa had entered a room and left the door open. "What happened?" Draco repeated, this time aiming his question at Harry.

Harry considered saying he didn't know. Draco might also appreciate the blissful ignorance, short as it would be. But he didn't have it in him to pretend. "Oh, you know," Harry said, sticking his hands in his pockets as they walked. "Nothing too crazy. Just saw that we made the cover of *Witch Weekly."*

Draco froze. "Come again?" he said in a high voice.

"Yep." Lucius went into the room ahead of them; for a moment, Harry and Draco were alone in the hall. "Someone must have had a camera at the Leaky. It, er. It's probably pretty bad."

Harry felt oddly giddy with nerves; he even laughed. Draco, however, looked like he might vomit. “At the Leaky?” he repeated, his magic paling as much as his face. “You mean when you were making all those weird sounds, and you *passed out on the table?”*

“That exact moment, in fact,” Harry said. “I’m guessing you didn’t tell your mother we went to Diagon at all, did you?”

“No,” Draco said, confirming Harry’s suspicions. “No, I… I did not.”

“Well. That’s a shame.” For even though Harry would have loved to have kept their outing between them, it was infinitely worse for them both that *this* was how his parents were finding out.

“Oh, we’re in trouble,” said Draco hollowly.

“Yeah. I suspect we are.”

“A *lot* of trouble,” murmured a portrait, some snotty-looking, old blonde witch with far too many adornments in her hair.

Draco and Harry both ignored her, but Harry knew she was right. And it really put things into perspective, he thought, when he realized that he might fear Narcissa’s wrath more than Voldemort’s.

Draco swallowed so hard Harry could hear it. He didn’t look at him as he resumed walking towards the open door, his gait similar to a man going to meet his untimely demise.

Harry followed. Draco paused before turning the corner, shooting Harry a venomous look when he whispered, “This is *your* fault.”

“I know,” Harry admitted. He walked past Draco to enter the room before him. “Most things are.”

The door shut behind them on its own. There was a strange ripple of magic in the air afterwards; Harry assumed this room was soundproof from anyone on the outside. The space reminded him a bit of the meeting room at the Ministry where Voldemort had taken him. There was a table, though not as long, with several chairs around it. There were no paintings on the walls, only intricate wallpaper and some shelves with a few books.

Narcissa and Lucius were already sitting. The issue of the *Witch Weekly* was splayed open in front of Lucius, who was currently reading. His magic, typically so like Draco’s, was beginning to

resemble Narcissa's storm cloud of fury with each passing second.

"Sit."

God, she's scary, Harry thought. He had the insane urge to yell, *This is* his *fault!* and to shove Draco forward, even though he'd just admitted it was his, Harry's, and Draco had been forced to go along with it.

Harry did no such thing and sat. Beside him, Draco did the same.

No one spoke. Narcissa had her hands folded in front of her as she waited for her husband to finish reading whatever monstrosity had been published about them. Harry and Draco did not look at each other once.

Finally, Lucius pushed the magazine a few inches away from him, signaling that he had, indeed, finished. Narcissa took it and held it up so Harry and Draco could see the cover. The damning picture was awful to watch as it moved; Draco covered his mouth in shock. For there he was—Draco Malfoy, sitting at a booth in the Leaky, and there was Harry, hurriedly approaching him. Draco looked mildly surprised, then annoyed as he downed his drink and stood, and then—

Then Harry collapsed. Hard.

He didn't remember that part, of course, but Harry now got to witness Draco Malfoy, looking utterly bewildered and stressed, as he grabbed Harry around the shoulders and hauled him out of the frame.

The sub-headline read, *REHABILITATION?* and in smaller text beneath it, *Harry Potter's adjustment to proper magical society is looking very improper (page 27).*

Draco's hand twitched like he might grab his wand—though what he thought he might do with it, Harry hadn't a clue. Vanish the magazine, perhaps, and convince his mother and father it was never there at all?

"I need you two to explain to me *exactly* why there is an article in *Witch Weekly* about you," Narcissa said in a gentle voice that made Harry want to hide under the table. "An article that says that you were seen at the Leaky Cauldron, *alone,* on Saturday. One that says, in a deeply unflattering tone, that you, Harry, must have been extremely drunk, to the point that you passed out in broad daylight in one of Diagon's most frequented pubs. And then I need you to explain this *photograph—"*

Her forced calm finally snapped at the word photograph. Her magic whirled, and Draco and Harry jumped in their seats. She inhaled a deep breath.

"…I need you to explain," Narcissa finished in a terse voice.

Harry and Draco dared to exchange a glance. Still, neither spoke. Lucius began tapping one finger on the table, looking as furious as his wife, but seemingly content to stay silent for the time being.

"Because I know my son wouldn't be so stupid as to take our ward, who is under *strict* supervision, somewhere without telling us," Narcissa eventually went on. "Just as I *know* you, Harry, would never think of doing something so rash in the first place."

Harry let out a terribly nervous laugh, because the reality was that she didn't know the half of it. He'd done *much* worse than take Draco with him to Diagon Alley; he'd escaped on his new firebolt in the dead of night, alone, to wander the Forbidden Forest.

Laughing, Harry learned, was not the right response. Narcissa's magic became even darker, whipping about her angrily. "Let me be perfectly clear before we proceed to discuss *this,"* she said, waving the magazine in front of her. "I, perhaps foolishly, believed that this was dreadfully *obvious:* you are, under *no* circumstances, to leave the manor without informing me or Lucius. This is our home, and you are *ours* to protect. That is not open to discussion!"

She raised her voice near the end, for Harry had dared to open his mouth as though he might interrupt.

"This is about much greater things than being integrated properly into magical society!" she carried on, her magic going wild. "Harry, you are the most closely watched and targeted individual in all of wizarding society! You—!"

She broke off, probably because Harry looked confused. "T… targeted?" he repeated.

Narcissa and Lucius shared a worried look, their magic mingling together as though conspiring. Draco stared at the ceiling.

"Harry," Narcissa started, speaking much more softly, "you have to understand your position, now. You have been more than merely pardoned by the Dark Lord. You have been *favored.* You have aligned yourself with him, with *us.* And…"

She hesitated. Her magic curled uncomfortably, and she shared another glance with her husband.

"And others will want you," she finished, and while she was clearly genuine with her words, Harry could tell it wasn't what she'd been thinking of saying.

"Er… what?"

"Want you!" Narcissa seethed, and her rage was back in a flash. "It was clear before your trial even ended—to anyone with a shred of intelligence, at least—that the Dark Lord has great plans for you, Harry! To be freed, to be given eyes like his—he favors you above most, if not all! And Salazar forbid when the public catches wind that you've been given his wand!"

Harry glared at Draco, who was still staring at the ceiling. *So, he told his mummy and daddy that, then.* Assuming they didn't already know, somehow.

"We were lucky!" Narcissa carried on, just as emphatically. "You being given to *us* as a ward was a gift we were given because it *fits the narrative.* You rejected our son's friendship as a child; it makes an excellent story of unifying broken bonds that you should be placed with us—a gift that *any* family would want! *Does* want! Even in the immediate aftermath of your trial there were whispers that you should have gone to a family *in better standing.* For Salazar's sake, we nearly lost you to the *Weasleys!"*

She shouted it in the same tone of voice one might use to say, *You nearly died!* Harry winced and sank lower in his seat.

"So this!" Narcissa brandished the *Witch Weekly* issue again, "is *unacceptable!* This will open a floodgate of other families vying for you; of letters being written and proposals being made; of bribes, of people *calling in favors* all in an attempt to have *the* Harry Potter moved to *their* home, to be rehabilitated *properly,* because THIS!"

She was on her feet, and her voice had risen to levels that might have rivaled a banshee's. The *Witch Weekly* began to smoke between her fingers.

"THIS IS NOT PROPER BEHAVIOR!"

The magazine burst into a ball of blue-black flames. Harry yelped and shielded his face; Draco almost fell out of his chair. Lucius alone

remained unphased as the magazine disintegrated his wife's lethal hands.

"Mother," Draco said meekly, "we—"

"What were you *thinking?* Why in the world did you two decide to wander off to Diagon without telling us? You *do* know that, when you leave this manor, we have Binny discreetly tail you?" Narcissa rounded on Lucius before Draco could respond, before Harry could process her words. "And why didn't *you* approach them at once when they came back? You are aware when someone enters the manor, you should have known when they suddenly returned, you…"

She paused, then folded her arms over her chest, looking cross. "You weren't home," she answered herself. "You weren't alerted because you weren't here."

Lucius didn't deny it. A dark, cold silence followed, but Harry's mind reeled.

Both Lucius and myself receive immediate notifications when anyone enters the property…

Harry had to stifle a sudden gasp.

Lucius and Voldemort were alerted when someone came to the manor… but only if they were within it, it seemed, according to Narcissa. Did that mean when he, Harry, came back from his midnight outing to the forest… Voldemort had felt it, when he'd returned? And Lucius had, too? If he was home…

Voldemort had. He had been waiting in Harry's room, but he hadn't been surprised at all when he'd entered. The fact that he hadn't torn the manor apart when he wasn't there remained a mystery to Harry.

Far more pressing was the knowledge that Lucius felt when people came, too…

He probably knows who the yellow-aura person is. Unless Voldemort manipulated the wards to prevent that…?

Harry was pulled from his thoughts when Narcissa heaved a great sigh. She sat. "We need to make some critical changes. We are a *family.* We are a united front, and so we must strategize and plan together."

“Are we?” Harry found himself saying. “I thought I was your *ward.* Which is apparently a prize that could be won by anyone.”

He knew that wasn’t true. Voldemort wanted Harry here, and there wasn’t a bribe or favor in the world that would have Harry moving anywhere else. Still, the bitterness in his voice was real.

Narcissa’s whole demeanor melted. She went from passionately incensed to crestfallen in a second, and her magic returned to its typical navy. “Harry,” she said, “you are as good as my son, now. Our son.”

She looked at Lucius; Lucius responded with the smallest, stiffest nod Harry had ever seen.

“In fact, I’ve half a mind to take you to the Ministry and go through the formal adoption process. To change your last name, make it irreversibly official, and be done with it.”

Harry barely contained his laugh, but he could not stop the smile that spread across his face at the idea. “Change my last name? Be *Harry Malfoy?”*

“You could be Potter-Malfoy, if you like,” Narcissa said, looking as though she was also on the verge of smiling, despite being serious.

“Even better!” Harry said. “Harry Potter-Malfoy. Oh—would that mean I have access to all the fun manor enchantments that the rest of you have? Because it might be worth it, then.”

“And that is *exactly* why I’ve only had half a mind to do it. Draco, *why* did you tell him about the manor enchantments?”

“I didn’t!” Draco declared. “He must have figured out about them on his own!”

“What!? You sodding liar, you were pleased as ever to walk into a painting and leave me behind!”

Draco made a scandalized sound as though he couldn’t believe Harry would out him. “What is wrong with you!” he fumed, his magic frazzling. “Why would you say that!?”

“Because you just fucking lied! Oh, I’m sorry, was I supposed to go with it and then later remind you that I covered for you? To use it against you later?”

“Yes!” Draco threw his arms out wide. “That is exactly what you were supposed to do! Gods!” His arms dropped, and he looked at his mother imploringly. “See, mother? He could never be a Malfoy, he’s far too slow.”

“Hey!” Harry said, whipping out his wand. Draco immediately did the same. “I'll show you slow, you—”

“Enough!” Narcissa slammed one hand down on the table, causing them both to startle. “Put your wands away this instant, or I will take them both!”

Harry didn’t need to be told twice. The last thing he needed was for her to follow through with that threat, and somehow, in some convoluted and confusing way, for *Narcissa Malfoy* to become the master of the Elder Wand.

“We have far more pressing issues at hand,” she said once Draco had also pocketed his wand. “That little *article* was a slight against our family, and our reputation cannot take anymore slander. First and foremost, and I would have thought this was obvious as well, but Harry, you *cannot* be drinking to the point of—no, in fact, no drinking *at all* unless it’s at an appropriate social outing, and even then—”

“No, that’s—that’s not what happened.”

Narcissa raised a brow at him, as did Lucius, though he still said nothing. “No?” said Narcissa. “Then please, by all means, explain what that horrendous photo was.”

Harry looked at Draco, but he had already gone back to staring at the ceiling, like that excused him from what was happening. Harry’s mouth felt suddenly dry. He swallowed hard.

“We’re, uh… a united front, are we?”

“Yes,” Narcissa answered, and her voice and magic became tinged with concern.

“You’re quite sure? Because the truth is actually quite a bit worse than some offensive day-drinking.”

“*What* happened?”

Harry felt deeply uncomfortable, but he couldn’t see a way around telling them. He’d already told Draco, and how else could he explain

such… episodes, especially if one were to happen again? And it wasn't as if the Dark Lord had told him not to say anything…But perhaps that was supposed to be *dreadfully obvious,* too…

"Er… well," Harry began, "I guess… first, you should know, it, ah. It really wasn't Draco's fault we went to Diagon. I made him go with me. I thought it would be fine if it was just us. I didn't… I didn't know we needed to tell you or Lucius or that Binny was tailing us… And we didn't go to drink at the Leaky. I wanted to go to Gringotts and see my vault. To get gold out to buy Ron a wedding present. That… that was all."

It wasn't a *complete* lie. Harry *had* intended to make several stops after he'd abandoned Draco and talked to Ollivander, he simply… couldn't.

"But," Harry went on, "that didn't happen. I mean, we went to Gringotts, but before I could go and get anything—oh, almost forgot—I snuck away from Draco after I visited my vault, because I wanted to have some time to myself. So he wasn't even with me; I was out, and he was waiting for me at the Leaky where I left him, and…"

Harry lost his nerve. His face was growing warm as Lucius's and Narcissa's magic swelled with both great annoyance and curiosity.

"And what?" Narcissa prodded.

Harry inhaled a deep breath. "Well, you have to understand… I… sometimes, I sort of… feel what *he*… is feeling."

She stared. Lucius stared as well, clearly uncomprehending. Draco's aura was bristling to the point of being distracting.

"The Dark Lord," Harry clarified. "It's always been the case, for me. When he's having powerful emotions, I feel them, and my scar hurts, and it can be… debilitating, to say the least. And when I was out, I felt him… kind of… well, he was mad. Really mad. Extremely, horrifyingly mad."

Draco was practically vibrating in his seat. Harry could tell he was on the precipice of interrupting, so he finished before he could. "He killed someone. Two… two people. I think. Nope—I know. I know he killed two people. And I… felt it, when he did that. And it messed me up, and I blacked out, and… well. That was the photo."

He forced a painful smile. Narcissa was white as a sheet, and Lucius had become so still he might have been a statue.

“Oh,” Narcissa said quietly. She looked like she would have needed to sit down, were she not already sitting. “Oh… I see.”

A stretch of silence. Lucius’s magic began to stir in ways that Harry did not understand nor like.

“Do… do you know who…?”

“No,” Harry lied at once. “I don’t know who it was. I couldn’t tell.”

Draco, at least, did not press him. There was another long moment where no one said anything.

Harry couldn’t stand it.

“Well, this was a great family meeting,” he said as he stood. “Can’t wait until the next one. I’ll—”

“Sit down.”

Harry only grimaced in immediate defeat and did as he was told.

“You’re right,” Narcissa said. “That… that is much more complicated and worse than the truth. Is that… is that why your magic became unstable? Because of… what *he* was feeling?”

“I find most of my problems can be traced back to him,” Harry said tonelessly, avoiding eye contact with anyone in the room.

“…I see. Well. We can’t… we need… Hm.”

She seemed to be taking the news that Harry was like the Dark Lord’s mercurial mood ring relatively well. Much better than Lucius, whose magic was much too lively, very at odds with his statuesque face.

“How often does this happen to you?” she asked.

“Not that often. Usually he can prevent it… it only happens when he’s incredibly upset or something.”

Narcissa did not look relieved in the slightest. “Then we need to think of a way for you to communicate to us if this starts to happen to you again. A sign, or a code word—something that lets us know when you are about to be overwhelmed, so we can help you. So we can get you away from prying eyes. We can’t have you having episodes and passing out in public like that without warning.”

“How about he shouts, ‘I’m barmy’?” Draco suggested unhelpfully.

“How about I shout, ‘Draco’s a twat’ instead?”

“How about you scream—”

“Stop it, you two,” Narcissa hissed. “We need a *real* solution.”

“All right. I’ll just—I’ll say it feels like rain. How’s that?”

“How’s that going to work?” Draco sneered. “Imagine we’re at some party and you suddenly say, ‘feels like rain!’ and then I’m rushing you away like a damsel in distress? That’s—”

“Stop! It’s… fine,” said Narcissa. “For now. I will think on this. That’s still far from our most pressing issue.”

“Is it?” Harry scoffed. “What’s more problematic than that?”

“Our family! Our *reputation!”*

Narcissa’s magic flipped back to enraged again in a second. “It hardly matters how that article occurred; the *truth* is not important, our *image* is. We must come up with a plan to combat this, *together.* We are officially doing damage control. I will not see this family suffer any more shame! We are the *Malfoys!”*

She stood. Narcissa started pacing behind the table, reminding Harry of himself when he was feeling particularly antsy. “We are not going to address this article directly,” she said, and her word felt like law. “We are above that.”

“So… is that it, then?” said Harry. “We just ignore it?”

“Oh, no. Not at all. No, articles like this—gossip columns—they come and go, rapidly. People have the attention span of nifflers anymore; they’ll be on to the next scandal within a day, they always are. Our best way forward is to make new headlines. Treat this one as next to nothing—oh yes, Harry was celebrating a bit too much, ha, ha—and create new, *better* topics for discussion. So.”

She stopped. Narcissa turned and faced them all, eyeing each of them in turn. “Ideas?”

“Er…”

Harry had nothing to offer whatsoever. He had no clue what he could

do now that would make headlines in any magazine that might be *flattering*.

"He could announce his intentions to return to Hogwarts," said Draco, and everyone turned to him.

"Hogwarts?" Narcissa echoed.

"Yes. He didn't exactly finish his schooling, did he? And every proper witch and wizard should complete their education, sit for their NEWTs, all that. Going back to school after the castle has been restored, where the curriculum has been revamped by the new regime, under the Dark Lord's rule… It would be good for him, and great for publicity in general. After all, if Harry Potter feels comfortable going back to Hogwarts after the war… who wouldn't?"

He looked very smug, Harry thought, for suggesting an idea that he'd stolen from *Daphne* as though it were his own. Narcissa nodded, looking impressed.

"All excellent points," she said. "What do you think, Harry? I think it's a wonderful idea. You'd be able to reintegrate in a familiar setting; *this* time, of course, with the intention of being much friendlier and open with the *right* sort…"

Harry didn't have the chance to consider her, for Lucius's magic darkened again, and Harry could tell he was finally going to speak.

"The *right* sort…" he repeated softly. "While I can acknowledge that Draco has made some fair points as well, I do believe we are putting too much faith in *Harry*. He is still a Potter. Nothing can change that. And if it is influence we are concerned with, here… and we are, considering he would have far too much *unsupervised* time at school, and considering his record for misbehaving… well. There will still be a Weasley at Hogwarts this year."

His eyes flashed to Harry's knowingly. Harry felt the breath leave his lungs in an audible puff.

Ginny.

He lived a whole year in a moment.

If he went back to Hogwarts, he would be in the same year and house as *Ginny*. They would have every class together. They would have quidditch and meals and late nights in the common room by the fire.

Harry had visions of being partners in Potions and studying together in the library and…

And he could never do it.

You've placed an enormous target on the back of Ginevra Weasley that will never disappear…

Harry could never go back; he knew it, and with the way Lucius was staring at him, Harry could tell…

He knows.

Lucius looked away, but his magic said far too much in the way it writhed in discomfort. Harry nearly blanched.

Lucius *knew.* He knew about Ginny, everyone knew about Ginny, but he knew that it was a problem, because he knew, he *knew—*

How? Harry was breaking out in a cold sweat; he gripped the bottom of his chair hard. *How could Lucius know? How—?*

Several realizations struck him at once.

The portraits.

The portraits, the portraits! *Why* hadn't Harry thought of them sooner? If *Draco,* as the Malfoy heir, had such power and influence here, he could only imagine what *Lucius* had. The portraits probably told him *everything* they saw, which meant…

Lucius knew about the time Voldemort had snatched him away, right in the middle of the manor's hall—after *pretending* to leave once he'd branded Hermione.

He knew about Harry, staggering around the halls, alone, before passing out, completely drained… *after* seeing Voldemort.

And then there were the wards. Was Lucius alerted when *Voldemort* came onto the property, too?

Surely not, Harry told himself—but *what if?* What if Voldemort had never bothered with keeping that information from Lucius, because it had never mattered before? What would he care if Lucius Malfoy was aware that he'd arrived in his home? Perhaps he even *liked* knowing that he knew that he was there; Harry could easily see him enjoying the thrill of terror he knew that his presence instilled in his followers

with whom he was displeased…

But that was before he started showing up in my bedroom every night at midnight for days and days and—

Oh God, does Lucius know… everything?

Lucius might know about him and Voldemort. Soon—perhaps even at this very moment—Bellatrix was going to learn that Harry was Lord Voldemort's unintended human horcrux.

Neither Draco nor Narcissa seemed to notice Harry's sudden panic. He cleared his throat and did his best to hide it as he white-knuckled the bottom of the chair. "No," he choked out. "No Hogwarts. I… don't want to go back, anyway."

Narcissa pursed her lips and frowned. "Well, it was a good idea… but all right. What else?"

"The Greengrass family is hosting their Summer Solstice celebration soon," said Lucius, who sounded far too calm and collected, in Harry's opinion. "A welcome and timely event that should provide an excellent opportunity to showcase some *good* behavior."

"True," said Narcissa. "But that's a week away yet. We need something more immediate first."

She sat again, fixing a stern look on Harry and Draco. "What you have done by going to Diagon was *bad,"* she said. "And under other circumstances, I would have you both sentenced to staying within the manor walls for weeks as punishment. However… I believe the opposite in order."

She smiled. "We are going to be making public appearances *frequently*. As a family. And you two in particular will be inseparable. You will be going out and having a visibly *good* and *proper* time with the *right* sort at every opportunity. In fact… I think we ought to make it seem as though you are open to courting, Harry."

Harry's horror at what Lucius may or may not know, miraculously, vanished. "C-courting?"

"Courting?" Draco repeated as well, though he sounded condescending. "Potter's in no condition to be seriously considering *marriage,* mother*."*

“No, he is not—and neither are you, for that matter,” Narcissa replied coolly. “We are in far too precarious of a position at the moment. We must first place the Malfoy name back at the very top of the list as the most prestigious of the Sacred Twenty-Eight before you can begin to consider finding a proper match. Unless you want to wind up with someone subpar.”

Draco seemed thunderstruck by this possibility. He looked to his father as though hoping he would disagree, but Lucius did nothing.

“No, I am not saying to engage in *real* courting behavior,” Narcissa went on, and Harry was relieved to hear it, because he had no idea what that was. “Only the illusion of it. Magazines like *Witch Weekly* love to publish stories about bachelors and their day-to-day activities. So, we will play into that. You are two single, eligible, of-age wizards. We are going to capitalize on that, to make you *beloved,* and soon this little anecdote about the Leaky—where did it go?”

“You set it aflame, dearest,” said Lucius, for Narcissa was searching for the offending magazine, looking confused that it was not on the table.

“Oh, right—well, soon it will be as nonexistent as my copy now is. Are we all in agreement?”

Harry was not in agreement. In fact, he thought it was possibly the worst plan in the world. Not that he didn’t think it would accomplish what she was hoping it might—Harry was sure she was correct, on that front. He unhappily agreed that the media would love to write stories about the infamous, free, strangely favored, *single* Harry Potter. He could practically hear Skeeter’s Quick-Quotes Quill scratching away already.

He could also too easily imagine how such headlines would make *Voldemort* feel.

Still, Draco was nodding, and so Harry, otherwise at a loss, shrugged non-committedly.

It seemed enough for Narcissa. “Good,” she said. Her magic brightened a bit, and her smile became warmer. “But not today. Today, Harry, we have work to do. It’s high time I teach you some *proper* pureblood etiquette.”

Draco smiled widely at him, looking like he wanted to laugh. “Have fun with that,” he drawled.

“You are going to be helping, Draco.”

His expression soured, and it was Harry’s turn to grin.

“I’m going to the Ministry,” Lucius announced. “I daresay the commotion shall be… unpleasant, surrounding this recent article, but perhaps I can stifle some of the whispers…”

Narcissa beamed at him as though she was proud. Harry got the sense that Lucius Malfoy had not *popped in* at the Ministry of his own volition in a long time, and this was a sign that he was getting back to his usual self.

“Good… that’s perfect. Thank you, Lucius.”

She kissed him on the cheek. In the moment that her lips touched his skin, their magic swirled together in the loveliest way: navy and silver, melding.

Then Lucius stood and left, giving Draco a fleeting but stern look before he did.

“We’ll start with formal dining,” Narcissa said brightly once he was gone, clapping her hands together.

Draco groaned. Harry could tell that it was going to be a long, unpleasant day.

Chapter End Notes

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Confrontation and Counsel

Harry never knew he could harbor such a cataclysmic hatred for forks.

No, this is the one you use first—from the outside in, Harry. No, *once you set it down you don't touch it again—any establishment with a proper staff of house-elves will have it vanished along with the first course, anyway.* No, *that's not strange, and if it doesn't vanish, you should be affronted. Not* out loud, *but you can make your disapproval known in a myriad of silent, graceful ways.*

Oh, could she.

Narcissa was a master of displaying such distaste with her facial features alone; a talent that Draco was also well-versed in. Harry was assaulted with those unimpressed expressions all morning, and while they were much more frequently aimed at him by Draco, Harry saw them on Narcissa, too. When he asked too many questions, usually.

Don't touch this. Do *touch that. Sit up straighter, elbows off the table. For the love of Slytherin, stop fidgeting. I said sit up straighter. Draco, quiet—we don't need your commentary right now. Harry, quit asking about the forks!*

But Harry couldn't quit asking about the forks, or the multiple spoons, or any of it for that matter, because it was all so utterly ridiculous to him. Harry dreaded the day he found himself in a magical, formal dining situation, because he was certain that he would make at least one massive error. Like using the wrong fork at the wrong time.

The horror.

It was a dreadful morning by any standard of measurement, but being forced to learn about etiquette did have one benefit. For a glorious few hours, Harry had all but forgotten some of the horrors of his life. By the time they'd finished reciting all the rules being hammered into his head (and being forced to practice when it was time for lunch—the slowest meal Harry had ever eaten, as he toiled over every bite under Narcissa's watchful eye and did his best to ignore Draco's exasperated sighs), Harry was so distressed over things like when to properly compliment a host, how to stop himself from bouncing his leg nervously, and where to place his hands while waiting (much of magical formal dining was waiting, Harry learned, and not touching anything while doing so), that he'd been wholly absorbed in it all.

But then lunch was over, Narcissa declared that it was time for a break, and reality set back in.

Hermione.

"It's lovely outside," Narcissa said as she motioned for Harry and Draco to leave the dining hall before her. "You two should take some time to fly, blow off some steam for an hour so before we're back at it."

Which sounded like a kind suggestion, but Harry knew what she was really doing. The pointed look she gave her son and flaring magic confirmed it—she did not want Harry left unsupervised for a moment.

Damn, Harry thought. He wondered how fast he could disarm Draco once they were out of Narcissa's sight. He contemplated whether the risk would be worth it to try and find Hermione, but before he could decide, the choice was taken from his hands.

He felt them: two nearly identical plumes of velvety magic that he could sense through the wall. They were headed towards them, one frazzled with anxiety while the other…

Bellatrix turned the corner first.

Her face was as fierce as her magic, and when her eyes landed on Harry, it sparked triumphantly. Harry didn't have to go looking for her—she was already clearly looking for *him,* and now she had found him.

Narcissa and Draco both froze, and Harry was equally debilitated as Bellatrix marched in his direction, radiating all the power of a storm. Hermione appeared behind her a moment later, her aura terrified, but Harry couldn't tear his eyes away from Bellatrix to look at her.

She's going to try and kill me, Harry thought blankly. He wondered if that counted as *rude,* and if it might kill her, too. He reached for his wand. Narcissa drew in a sharp breath like she might scream, and Draco retreated against the wall. Before anyone could do anything more than that, Bellatrix was before him, her eyes blazing, and she threw herself at his feet.

At first, Harry thought she'd tripped. He stared down at her riot of dark curls, finally pulling his wand out and aiming it at her, fully prepared for her to right herself and lunge. She didn't. Bellatrix stayed exactly as she was, and it was only then that Harry realized what she

was doing.

She was *bowing.*

Bellatrix was bowing so low that her head seemed to be touching the ground, her arms fanned out on either side, her magic thrumming…

Bowing. To *him.*

Harry's wand fell a fraction of an inch. He could feel Narcissa's and Draco's magic reacting in equally confused and stunned ways, but it was Hermione's that Harry locked onto. She was still far away, clear at the end of the hall. She gave him a distressed look that managed to convey what Harry feared.

She knows.

Of course she knew. Voldemort intended for her to find out, to discover that Harry was his horcrux. It was all a part of his plan.

But… was *this?*

"Harry Potter," Bellatrix said, and Harry jumped as though she'd decided to hex him after all. "I vow to honor and protect you with all my might, with all my magic."

She grabbed his hand—the one which held the yew wand—and Harry was too shocked to stop her, much less pull away. Her fingers slid along the wood, eyeing her master's old wand with reverence before fixing that awed gaze onto Harry.

"Your enemies will crumble beneath me," she said, her magic bolstering with passion. "Any who dare try to harm you will *suffer."*

Harry yanked his hand away. Bellatrix didn't seem bothered; she only lowered her head again.

"Wh… *what…?"*

It wasn't Harry who spoke, but Draco. Bellatrix ignored him as she stood, smoothing her skirt.

"Bella?" Narcissa said, looking as thunderstruck as Harry felt. "What…?"

But no one seemed capable of saying more than that. Bellatrix ignored her sister, too.

“Hermione,” she called over her shoulder, and it was jarring to hear Bellatrix call her by her first name. “We’ll reconvene tomorrow… I’ve abused you enough today.”

Bellatrix flashed Harry a smile, and her magic stirred amusedly. “Metaphorically speaking,” she said. “I wouldn’t *dare* hurt her intentionally.”

She gave another less formal but nonetheless subservient bow to Harry, then strode down the hall, humming a happy tune as she went.

Harry looked back towards Hermione, who seemed at a loss as well. No one spoke. Narcissa alone moved as though she might follow her sister.

Then something clicked into place in Harry’s brain.

“Hey—HEY!”

Harry rushed past Narcissa and Draco, quickly catching up to Bellatrix.

“Yes, Harry?”

“You—I’m not—in here.”

Harry picked a door at random and gestured angrily for her to go inside; Bellatrix smiled like the Cheshire Cat as she obeyed. Harry followed her, only to learn that he had ordered her into another spare bedroom. He pretended not to notice as he slammed the door shut behind him, locked it, and cast a silencing charm.

“Is there a problem?” Bellatrix asked, her smile only growing wider. “Someone you need to sic me on already? Is it Draco? Has he been *mean* to you?”

She laughed. Harry’s fingers tightened around his wand. “Stop that. I’m not—I’m not *him!”*

“Whatever *are* you talking about?” she asked with feigned innocence.

“I know you know what I am! I know you know I’m a horcrux, *his* horcrux, because Hermione figured it out a long time ago!”

Bellatrix’s magic curled in a dark and covetous way. “Yes. You are.” Her eyes went to his scar, then back to his. Eyes that now looked just like her master’s. “Of course you are.”

“I’m not him,” Harry seethed again, for he could see it in the way her eyes burned and magic whirled. This wasn’t forced reverence; this was far too similar to delusional, passionate servitude. The likes of which Harry knew she reserved solely for Lord Voldemort. “This part of his soul? He didn’t mean to… to *give* it to me. It was an accident! And just because it’s here, it doesn't mean… We’re not the same. I’m not some part of him or something like that!”

“Aren’t you?” Bellatrix’s expression was wonder-filled as her gaze continued to flicker between his scar and his eyes. “I should have seen it long ago myself… Not many people know much about horcruxes, but I do. If you think the restricted section of the library at Hogwarts had dark books, you’ve no idea what kind of books *my* family’s library had… But it’s so much more than even that with you two, isn’t it?”

Harry’s heart nearly gave out as panic gripped him. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“You and him. The prophecy that bound you, the sharing of his soul… You’ve always belonged to him, haven’t you? You say you’re not him, but you are. He’s been a part of you for nearly your entire life. You don’t have any idea who you are without him, because he has always been with you, in you. You *hold* his *soul.”*

Her magic shone with wonder—and no small amount of jealousy, Harry thought. “You are the most honored and precious being in this world.”

She lifted one hand like she might touch his face. Harry thrust his wand at her and she backed off, smirking. “Don’t,” he hissed. “You’re insane. He hasn’t—having some of his soul in me hasn’t changed who I am, it’s just… there. I’m still me. I still fucking *hate* you.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

Harry laughed, because it seemed an honest question. “Are you serious? Why would I hate you? Why would I hate you!” He jabbed his wand harder; red sparks flared from the tip. “Where to even begin! You killed Sirius! You tortured and killed Neville! You—!”

The sparks grew brighter, violently so. Bellatrix did not look amused any longer. Her gleaming, gun-metal hand hovered over her hip, looking like she might draw her own wand, though she was unable to do so. Silence filled the space between them, tense and terrible.

“And you blame me?” she said at length. “For the death of your

godfather? For the Longbottoms?"

"What kind of stupid question is that? Of course I do!"

Bellatrix lowered her arm. "Ah. I see… I understand, even. But you should understand, too."

She leaned close to him, the flaring tip of Harry's wand almost touching her chest. "You may blame me for all of that—you can blame me for every sorrow and pain you've ever endured, if you like. But you should recognize and acknowledge power where it lies. If you take a step back from each and every decision I have ever made, you will find the Dark Lord behind it, as he is behind all things. Alice and Frank Longbottom? Targeted because of what he said, because of his words—an act for which I was not solely responsible in any manner. Neville Longbottom? Tortured at his command, and killed in the end by him, not me. I was, as always, a tool which he wielded. Your *godfather?* My dear cousin? The only reason he was at the Ministry was because of the Dark Lord's plan. He was the one who tricked you; he was the reason anyone was there at all. It was his design. It is *all* his design."

The sparks on Harry's wand went out.

"So you can blame me, Harry, if that's easier for you," she went on, her tone nearly pitying. "If that is what makes accepting your role as his most valued possession more palatable, then by all means, do. You are trapped in his orbit now, just as we all are. He is the sun around which we all dance. And it's impossible, Harry, to not worship the sun."

Harry's arm dropped to his side. Bellatrix didn't look or sound vindictive; her voice was very matter-of-fact as she kept speaking. "If laying your misplaced hatred for all he has done, all he will always do as the rightful ruler of wizarding kind, on *me* eases your guilt… If it makes falling into your rightful place easier… then I am *honored* to be the vessel of your undeserved wrath."

She bowed again, as subservient as before. Harry didn't move, and though he opened his mouth to retaliate, not a single word came to him.

Bellatrix's eyes went to his scar one last time before she left, and Harry didn't do a thing to stop her, his ears ringing in the silence once she was gone.

Harry fiddled with the ring as though it were little more than a spare coin.

It was late. He wished he could close his eyes and forget the entire day, but of course he couldn't.

Narcissa and Draco hadn't questioned Bellatrix's actions. Despite being clearly alarmed by them, when Harry returned, Narcissa seemed to think a break was no longer needed and was instead twice as determined to teach him frivolous and meaningless etiquette. Draco went along with it with a much more forced enthusiasm, but nothing —not even hyper-fixating on what kind of glass was used for what kind of beverage—was enough to stop Harry's mind from wandering.

It was not until hours later that he was finally able to speak with Hermione. But, for once, Hermione hadn't had much to offer him.

After describing how challenging it was to be learning Occlumency from the witch whose arm she'd cut off, she'd reassured him over and over again that Bellatrix was *wrong,* that of course Harry was exactly the same person he always was and would have been, and that Voldemort's unfortunate sliver of soul had no bearing on any of it.

But now, Harry wasn't so sure.

Perhaps Bellatrix was right. He really didn't know what life was like without Voldemort's soul inside of him. Maybe it had changed him. Maybe he would have been a completely different person if he'd never had it.

Sadly, that was not the worst thing she'd told him.

His *misplaced* anger…

Harry felt sick to his stomach.

He flipped the ring over, examining the crack that divided the stone. Snape would surely have plenty to say. Harry didn't know why he was hesitating; it wasn't like he had anyone else he could discuss all the horrors of his life with. Ron didn't know about the horcrux, and while Harry couldn't see how he would be kept in the dark forever, he wasn't going to tell him himself. Hermione knew about the horcrux but didn't know *everything* when it came to Harry and the Dark Lord, and even when Harry did get the chance to speak with her privately, it was never for long. Ron had interrupted their conversation earlier when he'd come back from the Ministry, which had been later than

anticipated. A small camp of muggle-borns that had been in hiding was caught and brought in to be questioned and registered. Ron had looked so miserable when he'd told them that neither Harry nor Hermione pressed him for details.

Voldemort's fault. Everything was Voldemort's fault.

It was heartbreaking for Harry to think about, because it felt like he was realizing it for the first time.

It's impossible, Harry, to not worship the sun.

Had he really been doing everything that Bellatrix said? Using her as the scapegoat to place all of his anger so that he could rationalize… however it was he felt about Voldemort?

And how *did* he feel about him?

Harry turned the ring over once. Yes, Snape would have a *lot* to say. He paused before he turned it again.

It was almost midnight.

Would Voldemort appear? It seemed that ritual was no longer being upheld. Harry wondered how he was doing. Voldemort might have had his fill of Harry's soul before, but that was days ago. Was he still fine? Was he beginning to get… needy, again?

Probably, Harry reasoned. He thought he was getting better and better at understanding Voldemort's addiction to him. So long as he wasn't out casting horrific magic, he could go a decent amount of time without him… but it wasn't great, if he did. That was when he became colder, when he slipped further back into the dark and terrible wizard that he was.

Harry needed Voldemort to need him.

He slipped the ring into his pocket and fell back on his bed. With only a few minutes left until midnight, he decided it would be safest to wait. He'd already had one conversation with his deceased Potions instructor interrupted by the Dark Lord's sudden arrival; he did not need another.

Or do *I want him here?* Snape had been helpful, certainly, but his presence had also been mortifying. Harry didn't think he could do that to himself intentionally.

He stared at his reflection above the bed and waited.

A minute passed, then another. Midnight came and went.

Voldemort didn't come.

Why?

Harry sat up. As much as he dreaded the many potential turns their next conversation could take, he did not *want* Voldemort keeping away from him, not for long—something Voldemort himself surely didn't want, either, even if he was in denial about it half the time. Why was he staying away, now? Was he too busy? Harry doubted it.

Maybe he still feels bad, he thought, the idea as ludicrous as it was feasible. He'd kept his distance from Harry for a long time after he'd given him a wand, hadn't he? After he…

Harry shook his head. He waited a few more minutes before he pulled the ring back out. Taking a deep breath as though he were about to dive into cold water, he turned it three times in his palm.

"Potter."

Snape appeared silently in the corner of his room where Voldemort so often did. Harry stood, unsurprised to see that he had his arms crossed and an unhappy expression on his face.

"Well?" Harry said, skipping all pleasantries. "Is Bellatrix right? Am I being a fucking idiot? Do I hate her for no legitimate reason? And why isn't the Dark Lord here? Why didn't he come? What—"

"Potter." Snape said it sterner the second time, cutting Harry off. "Take a breath ."

Glaring, Harry did. It didn't make him feel any better. "Well? What do you think? What should I *do?"*

Snape slowly uncrossed his arms. "I think… you should sit."

"Why?"

"Because if you hyperventilate, there is exactly nothing I can do to help you." When Harry only continued to glare at him, he went on, saying, "Sit, or I will leave."

Harry lowered himself to perch on the edge of his bed again.

“You are not wrong for harboring a great deal of hatred for Bellatrix Lestrange,” Snape said. “But she is not wrong, either.”

Harry almost jumped back up. “She is not,” Snape repeated before he could. “You have been collecting all of your rage and placing it solely on her as a way of coping. Because that *is* easier, given your… circumstances.”

“You mean my blossoming relationship with Voldemort?”

Though Harry’s voice was thick with sarcasm, saying the word *relationship* out loud made it feel like a living, breathing presence in the room.

Quite unlike his former professor. “Yes,” Snape agreed, and Harry envied his lack of human emotion. “It’s hardly your fault. He has been working towards endearing himself towards you for many weeks now. He values your opinion of him more than he values nearly anything. Or have you somehow failed to notice this?”

Harry’s mouth went dry and his face began to warm. “I…”

“You have,” Snape finished for him. “When you insult him, he reacts in disastrous—one might say *dramatic*— ways. And when you praise him, even slightly, he preens. You’ve sensed it in his magic for quite some time now. You already know how deeply he craves your approval… how deeply he craves much more than your approval.”

“What—you know about that?” Harry asked, seizing the one part of his statement that didn’t make his skin feel like it was on fire. “My, er, sensing magic thing?”

“Potter,” Snape said, and his expression alone said enough.

“Right, okay—you know everything I know.” Harry ignored Snape’s previous instructions and stood, brimming with too much excitement to stay still. He hadn’t yet talked to anyone about his newfound ability. “Do you know what that is? How did that happen, why can I do it now? Can other people sense magic like this?”

Thankfully, Snape didn’t reprimand him for getting up, only gave him an irritated look. “I have not heard of anything quite like it,” he admitted. “Not the way you can. There are certain enchantments that allow the caster to experience magic in similar ways, but they are temporary. I’ve never heard of someone… developing the ability and having it last for so long.”

“Why do you think I can, then? I didn’t do anything.”

“No… *you* didn’t. And I have only a theory, not an answer.”

“Okay. What’s your theory?”

“Magic… is not simple,” Snape began. “While we have learned to harness and control it in precise ways, it is wild and raw by nature. Everyone’s is different, as you now know very well. *Your* magic seems especially attuned to your will. When you want to survive, you do, against all odds, and your magic helps. When you want to die, your magic lends itself to that, too… and when you wanted to see… Well, your magic alone could not undo what the Dark Lord did to you. My theory is that it managed to bring out a mild or dormant aptitude you already had, allowing you to see not in the way you were used to, but in another way.”

“…Huh.”

Harry walked slowly around his room as he contemplated that, twirling the ring in his fingers as he did. “Well, I hope your theory is right and not mine. I thought maybe it was a strange side-effect of Voldemort giving me eyes like his.”

“That’s also a possibility, but I don’t think so, no. *He* does not have this ability, after all. If he did, he wouldn’t have such a difficult time predicting and understanding your emotions… one would hope.”

Harry almost laughed. “Fair point,” he said. “Hey—you don’t think—you don’t think he knows about it, do you? This new ability of mine? I’ve been trying to keep it a secret, but… he’s possessed me before, and—you know—with all our weird… everything… Do you think he’s seen what I’ve seen? Does he know and is just pretending not to, for some reason…?’

“I don’t believe so,” Snape answered, to Harry’s relief. “Though it’s a small miracle that he hasn’t. If he had, I’m certain he would want to know absolutely everything he could about it. More importantly, he would want to know how to control and likely get rid of it. Being able to sense his magic has been a *massive* boon to you, giving you an edge over him and others in ways that would enrage him. He isn’t particularly fond of *you* having power that *he* does not.”

Harry swallowed hard. Snape was right—knowing Voldemort, he would relate Harry’s ability right back to the prophecy he had so recently decided was meaningless, and who knew how the mercurial

Dark Lord would spiral after *that*.

"If anyone is likely to figure it out in the immediate future," Snape went on, "it's Miss Granger. Or Mrs. Weasley, I should say."

"Hermione?"

"Yes, Potter. You all but *told* her that you could sense her magic when you were helping her repair that vase. You weren't exactly subtle with your descriptions."

"I was trying to help!" Harry nearly dropped the ring when he brandished his arm. "What was I supposed to do? He just left her there, said she couldn't leave until she fixed it, and—well, you know what he said! *Do I need to embellish that command with a threat?* Or whatever it was."

"I did not say you did anything *wrong,"* Snape said tersely. "Only that you were not subtle, and when it comes to Hermione now-Weasley in particular, you need to exercise *much* more caution. She is too quick to piece things together. Considering that she is now having her mind invaded regularly by Bellatrix Lestrange, you must move forward knowing that anything your dear friend Hermione knows, she knows, and anything Bellatrix learns will immediately be fed directly to the Dark Lord."

"Oh."

Harry felt stupid, hearing him explain, because it was all obvious. He couldn't talk to Hermione about being able to see magic, or the Deathly Hallows, or his… *relationship*… with Voldemort at all. Not that he'd been keen to discuss the last topic with her or anyone, ever, but knowing it wasn't an option made Harry's heart feel heavy.

He couldn't talk to Hermione, he *shouldn't* talk to Ron…

All he had… was Snape.

And he was dead.

"You are focusing on the wrong things here, Potter."

Harry jumped at how loud he spoke, his eyes nearly lifelike in their borderline anger. "The Hallows?" he asked. "Do you think—?"

"No, I don't. The Deathly Hallows being united to mean anything

substantial is a children's tale and nothing more. You're wasting your time, thinking it's anything else."

"What!? What do you mean?" Harry all but shoved the ring in his face. "You're the living—er, sorry, the opposite of living proof that they're not! And the Elder Wand, that *definitely* has an obscene amount of power, it's real, and—"

"I didn't say the objects themselves weren't real. They are *very* real. It's the Master of Death that is a fantasy. Each object holds a great deal of magical power, yes, but there *is* no being who can control Death. That is the entire point of the story. The only one who can lay claim to the title of Master of Death is one who accepts that Death is an inevitability. That could be no one or anyone. There's no secret well of power waiting to be unlocked; you won't be able to bring those who have died back. So stop wasting time hoping that you might."

Harry felt himself deflate, because Snape was right on that account, too—he'd been secretly fantasizing about exactly that—but he was only disheartened for a moment. "I think you're wrong," he said simply.

Snape looked like he might start yelling at him, but then made a defeated sound instead. "You are still focusing on the wrong things. Your priority should *not* be trying to become some make-believe legend by doing the impossible —*stealing the Dark Lord's prized wand*— but in mitigating damage to the wizarding world in the only way *you* can… and as of yesterday, you managed to do something monumental."

Snape crossed the room to stand beside Harry's bedside table. "This," he said, jabbing a finger down, "is *astounding,* Potter."

The list. Snape's pale, slightly glowing finger was tapping the piece of parchment with the names of the recently released prisoners from Azkaban.

"Is… is it?"

But Harry's face was already growing warm again, because he had an idea of as to where this conversation was heading.

"Yes. You asked for a list. He not only provided, but he released multiple prisoners whom he had every reason to let rot for the rest of their lives. All because he felt *guilty."*

Snape looked nearly awestruck. “This is uncanny behavior for the Dark Lord, Potter. Never in all my years of serving him would I have predicted this. He is changing, because of you.” He shook his head disbelievingly. “He… is changing.”

“Is… is he?”

“Yes!”

Snape slammed his hand down on the bedside table, but it made no noise. “And you know it! Just six weeks ago, he was *more* than pleased to drag you naked to a Death Eater meeting, bound by enchanted snakes that burned your skin! To humiliate you in front of a dozen of his closest followers, to expose you, to force you to sign away the only property you owned! Do you think he would even dream of behaving in such a manner now?”

Six weeks. Harry could hardly wrap his head around it—that meeting felt so long ago.

“…No,” Harry answered, and it was the truth. He imagined that Voldemort would sooner pluck out the eyes of anyone who would see Harry naked now.

“Which is why the mere suggestion that you may be courting is a disastrous idea,” Snape said. “Though I also agree that Lucius is suspicious of the Dark Lord’s attraction to you, if not fully aware. With any luck, he’ll convince Narcissa to abandon that plan in favor of something else.”

“Y-you think Lucius knows?”

“I think *everyone* will know eventually,” Snape said seriously. “The Dark Lord is cunning, clever and brilliant in many aspects, but this is new territory for him, and he’s floundering. He’s never cared for anyone the way he cares for you. He seeks your favor and asks your opinion; he’s given you his wand and is keeping you close, and he *cares, genuinely,* about how you *feel.* He has told you, in a number of obscenely obvious if not direct ways, *exactly* how he feels himself.”

“Wh-what—has he?”

Harry was glad Snape was dead, wandless, and magicless in that moment, for he was certain he would have been hexed otherwise. “You fascinate me, Harry Potter,” Snape sneered, and it took Harry a moment before he realized what he was doing.

“Nothing and no one, ever, ever will compare to you… *my light.”*

Reciting. *Voldemort’s* words.

“And my very favorite,” he continued in the same sarcastic drawl, “How would you feel, knowing you have the heart of a *fucking* monster in your keeping?”

Harry’s own heart was pounding. Snape looked both disgusted and amazed, looking at him like he’d never seen Harry Potter before.

“Because of a combination of your exceedingly rare connection and because of who you are… you have managed what I would have said was impossible, Potter. The Dark Lord…”

He paused. Harry almost hoped he wouldn’t finish his statement, but he did.

“He’s fallen in love with you.”

Harry let out a horrible, strangled laugh that was much too high, and he backed up several paces like he might run away. A glance in the vanity mirror showed him that his face was bright red. “Th-th-that’s… *In love?* Don’t be—you can’t—that’s…”

“Don’t make the task of helping you come to terms with reality any harder than it already is,” Snape said. “You know it’s true as well as I do. He is obsessively infatuated with you, despite being consistently infuriated and confused by you as well. I doubt he will come fully to terms with how deeply he has fallen for some time, but that doesn’t mean *you* should suffer the same delusion. You can use this, Potter. You would be a fool not to.”

His thin lips curled, a small, near-smile. “You already have, in some regards. You’ve manipulated him multiple times, knowing he would cave to you, every time. And he has. But it’s time you acknowledge that it is far more than your soul or body he desires. He wants *all* of you. He wants your *heart.”*

Do you know how your heart haunts me?

Harry turned away. He drew in a deep breath, trying to control his flustered feelings, because his *feelings*—

“Yes, he can feel them when they become too strong. You should have tried harder when I attempted to teach you Occlumency. If you had

mastered the ability to empty your mind—"

"Don't. You weren't exactly a patient teacher, and—oh, God."

Occlumency. He was going to be learning it from *Voldemort himself* soon. And he—

"Your plan on that front is beyond reckless," Snape said, as though Harry had just shared it with him. "Buying a Pensieve and emptying certain memories into it before any lessons?"

Which was, indeed, Harry's plan. "Well, it's exactly what *you* did, isn't it?"

"Our situations are hardly comparable. *I* was not the one being taught. I was the professor, the one with all of the power. I had no need to hide my Pensieve from you… though in hindsight, I clearly should have, seeing as I assumed incorrectly that not even you would not be bold and stupid enough to *look* the second I left."

"Shouldn't have left me alone in your office," Harry said, to which Snape looked nearly mutinous. "It's not that bad of an idea though, is it? I get a Pensieve, dump everything I don't want him seeing into it, and—"

"And what? Hope he doesn't find out and then immediately watch every memory you've siphoned?"

"…Yeah, pretty much."

Snape closed his eyes like he needed a moment. Harry waited patiently. "Reckless," he said again. "And flawed at its foundation. You will never be able to go out to Diagon Alley or anywhere else again in secret to make such a specific and suspicious purchase."

"I know," Harry groaned.

"You should ask the house-elf."

"Er—what?"

Snape gave another almost-smile at what Harry was sure was a shocked expression on his face. "Tell the house-elf, Binny, to bring a Pensieve to you. Lucius has one, possibly more than one, and I doubt he uses them often. Word your command carefully. Instruct the elf to bring it to you at the appropriate time, then to hide it from *everyone*

until you personally summon him again."

"You're… I thought you said this plan was reckless," Harry said, confused.

"It is. But reckless is not always synonymous with stupid. Is there risk? Of course. But I can think of no other way in which you might even have a chance at keeping certain knowledge from the Dark Lord, not until you master Occlumency yourself, and even then… well."

He made a gesture that somewhat resembled a shrug. "You might as well try. You have a great deal to gain if it somehow works, and not much to lose."

"He'd be really mad," Harry pointed out.

"Yes. Though perhaps not as furious as you might think. It's not as though he's instructed you to *not* do so. You could make a compelling argument for wanting to keep some semblance of privacy… He might be more understanding than you'd think. Perhaps even impressed by your daring and cunning."

"So you *do* think it's cunning."

"Don't let it inflate your ego, Potter. You got the idea from me, after all."

Harry grinned. "I sure did," he said, but then his smile fell. "He'd still immediately watch everything I was hiding from him though, wouldn't he?"

"Probably."

"Great." Harry tried not to imagine how *that* might go. In particular, his reaction to any conversation where Harry sought counsel from a dead-Snape using his broken horcrux, or, perhaps worse—Voldemort seeing the memory of Harry as he discussed the loyalty of the Elder Wand with Ollivander. *The master of the master of the Elder Wand* were not words Harry thought Voldemort ever needed to hear. "Well, I'd better not get caught, then."

"Unless you convince him not to watch them. Just as you could likely persuade him to do any number of things… Just as you already are."

He tapped the list again. "This is *good* behavior, Potter," he said firmly. "You need to *reward* it."

Harry's face flashed with heat again in an instant. "R-reward?"

But it wasn't really a question, more of a dumb, parroting echo, because Harry knew where this was going, too.

"You must nurture this behavior," Snape said. "You hardly need me to tell you that. Shifting the Dark Lord's tendencies away from cruelty and violence is the best thing you can do for this world he's created. If you're *smart* about it… then you really will have him on a leash."

Harry choked and started coughing, which was especially odd, because it wasn't like he was drinking anything. He struggled to breathe. He felt like running again.

"Sit back down, Potter, before you hurt yourself."

"Who cares if I hurt myself?" Harry said between painful breaths. "I'll just bounce right back anyway. Is that something you know more about? The elixir of life? Who d'you think is making it? Oh, and—this whole Binny thing, any theories as to why he's decided I'm his master these days? Oh! And who do you think healed me those times? Any guesses as to who—?"

"Potter! None of that is important!"

Snape gestured sharply towards the list yet again, and Harry was certain that if he could have picked it up and beat him with it, he would have. *"This* is important! People's lives—the lives of every witch and wizard in Britain, if not outside of it—depend, in ways more colossally than you can appreciate, on *you.* On *your* ability to tame the monster that is the Dark Lord, to reel in his horrific blood lust. You…"

He paused, what little rage he had already vanishing. "You have no idea how much power you hold, Potter."

Harry was quiet for a long time. He twirled the ring around and around in his hand.

"I know," he eventually whispered. "I… I know. I just—how am I…?"

When his voice trailed off, Snape's expression slid back into something detached. "One thing at a time," he said. "Worry only about tonight. You do need to get him to come to you, and I believe your assumption is correct—he is staying away because he feels guilty."

He shook his head again like he still couldn't quite believe everything he was saying—the Dark Lord, guilty. The Dark Lord, in love.

"So how do I get him to come back?" Harry asked. "The… the same way I did, er… *before?"*

"Do *not* use sex as a weapon, Potter. You are far too young, inexperienced, and emotionally vulnerable to do so in any manner that wouldn't backfire spectacularly. You tried once, and the results were *terrible* . Don't do it again. And for the love of God, *sit down and breathe,* or your flustered emotions right now will be enough to make him concerned before you're ready."

Harry didn't attempt to argue again, but threw himself onto his bed. "Well, what should I do, then? Get really angry? Because that wouldn't be hard, but then he'd probably be mad that I'm mad, and then—I dunno, I'd end up breaking some furniture and saying something stupid. And being sad isn't a great option either, because if he thinks for a second I might try and off myself again I'm going to end up shrunk and kept in a tiny unbreakable glass vial so he can keep me in his pocket at all times."

"The human mind is capable of more than just three emotions, Potter… Show me how well you've been paying attention. What does he want from you? More than anything?"

Harry ran his finger along the broken stone on the ring. Above him, his reflection was flushed and disheveled. "He wants…"

He almost said *my approval,* but he knew that was not the right answer.

"He wants me to want him," he said. "He wants… my heart."

Do you know how your heart haunts me?

"Precisely," Snape responded. "So, rather than try to lure him to you with rage or sorrow or lust… *want* him."

Harry raised one brow at him, not understanding.

"You *do* want him to come, yes? Focus on that. On how desperately you want him to appear here, now, because you *need* him and you know he *needs* you. Not physically, not sexually. Emotionally. It's called *yearning,* Potter. *Yearn."*

Harry covered his face with his hands, pressing the ring into his cheek. “Okay,” he mumbled, mortified, because *Snape just told him to yearn for Lord Voldemort,* and the wizarding world depended on it.

“And once he comes—because he will—you—”

“I know what to do.”

Harry pushed himself up and walked swiftly past Snape until he was at the vanity. “Thank you for all your guidance, but I’ve got it from here.”

“Wait—Potter, do not—”

Harry opened a drawer and dropped the ring inside. Snape vanished on the spot.

He did know what to do… and he would *never* be able to do it with dead-Snape watching him.

Harry sighed and started to pace the room. *Yearning.* He could do that. He could *yearn.*

Please come back, he thought, reaching in a way that he knew wouldn’t work, but was unable not to try. Nothing.

Please come back, please, you have to come, he tried again. *You’ve been away too long. I need you to be here with me, you can’t keep away, you have to come, please, please, please.*

The longer it went on, the less he needed to try. Harry started to feel shaky with nerves and his thoughts grew wilder and more desperate.

Please, you can’t do this, you can’t hide, I’m not angry, I’m not—I need you, I want you, I’m begging you to please, please come, don’t do this to me, to us—you have to come back, I’m going to fall apart if you don’t, please, Tom, please—

His scar prickled and burned.

Yearning

Chapter Notes

Big thanks to eleven_eaves and Venny for beta-reading! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The tingling sensation faded. There was an agonizing moment where nothing happened, and Harry feared he'd failed.

No, don't do that, don't shut me out, don't—

He appeared in a flourish of black and dazzling gold.

Not behind him, not in some ominous corner where he might pretend to be stealthy. Voldemort materialized directly in front of the door of Harry's room, and Harry could sum up his expression and aura both in a single word:

Baffled.

Or maybe bamboozled would have been more appropriate, or flabbergasted, or something even more ridiculous. Harry had never seen Voldemort look so confused; he probably never had been. It might have been funny to Harry if he weren't so worked up with nerves, so tightly wound with the feelings he'd conjured up.

But he didn't need to panic anymore. *He came.*

Harry crossed the room in two long strides, and for perhaps the first time ever, Voldemort was the one taking an uncertain step back in response. But Harry was fast, and before the Dark Lord could likely wrap his head around what was happening, Harry was upon him.

"Thank you," he breathed. Harry placed both hands on his handsome face, looked straight into his widened, red eyes, and kissed him.

Softly, slowly. Harry had *never* initiated a kiss like that before, and he was not disappointed in the results. After another heartbeat where Voldemort's body went rigid, where his magic too seemed to come to a stunned standstill, he crumbled.

Voldemort's lips parted, and he pulled Harry closer; if he was still confused—*how could he not be?*—he seemed content to pretend

otherwise. Harry's arms wound around his neck and relief, waves of it, washed over him.

He came. He came, he's here.

And his *magic.* Voldemort's magic warmed in an achingly gorgeous way, a rosy hue that eclipsed nearly all the black, dancing with the sparks of gold, and yes, Harry could not deny it now that the word had been thrown in his face: blooming with *love.*

He loves *me. Even if he doesn't know it.*

Harry's fingers trailed up Voldemort's neck, twining into his hair, and…

It was damp. Harry pulled back.

"Why…?"

Now that he looked properly, Harry could see a few things he'd not noticed upon his arrival. Voldemort's hair was wet. And he was wearing black, he was always wearing black, but… he was wearing silky pants that were definitely suited for lounging at home, not practicing evil magic, or doing other nefarious, probably political, Dark Lord things. And he did have his usual robe on over that, but…

No shirt underneath.

As though he'd just rushed to get dressed before heeding Harry's desperate, *yearning* summons from Malfoy Manor at half past midnight.

"I—were you… were you… in the shower?"

It was the obvious conclusion, strange though it was, and it was confirmed when Voldemort, to Harry's utmost surprise… *blushed.*

Never had he looked more vulnerable, standing before Harry, semi-dressed and in a state of complete bewilderment.

"What *is* this?"

Already Voldemort's eyes narrowed, his magic sharpening with his swiftly returning clarity, and, much worse, defensiveness. Harry knew he couldn't allow it. He'd never been in such an advantageous position before. If he gave Voldemort even seconds to regain his footing, he would, and Harry knew how quickly he could turn the tables.

"*What* is the meaning—?"

Harry kissed him again.

There was another moment where Voldemort's muscles tensed, clearly just as confused, if not more so, but then he once more melted. His hands went to Harry's waist, tugging him closer. Their chests were flushed, and his magic grew rosier and heavier at the same time, lustrous, yearning.

Fuck.

What was he doing? This wasn't a part of his grand plan, Harry thought as he found himself craning his neck back, allowing Voldemort's tongue to slip past his parted lips and move against his own. He wasn't supposed to be twisting his fingers in his damp hair with one hand while the other slid to his chest, which was bare beneath his outer robe, smooth and hard. Voldemort's magic glistened ever brighter with want, his intentions clear. Snape's words echoed in the back of his mind:

Do not *use sex as a weapon, Potter.*

That wasn't the plan, but it seemed to be well on its way to happening. Harry hadn't expected a kiss to escalate so quickly. He also hadn't anticipated a half-naked Dark Lord to show up, all flustered and *wet* and *blushing,* and how was he ever supposed to *not* be pulled into the sinkhole that was Voldemort's all-consuming lust?

It was only the image of Snape's disgusted face in his mind that gave Harry the strength to pull away.

Snape. Harry was an idiot for thinking he could do this without him.

"Wait. I-I want… I need to tell you something."

It was, perhaps, an even more reckless, spur-of-the-moment plan, but Harry thought it would work. Voldemort's pink-tinged face crumpled with annoyance. He gripped Harry's waist harder, pulling him so tightly against him that Harry could feel his cock against his thigh, already stiffening.

"Tell me after," the Dark Lord said in Harry's ear before biting it. He dragged his tongue down Harry's neck, then began kissing it, teasingly, the way a vampire might before sinking their teeth in and sucking.

Harry couldn't stop him. No—he didn't *want* to stop him. He knew that if he just opened his mouth and told him to, he would, but the only sound that he made was an awful, needy sigh. And *why* was he pulling his damp hair as though demanding more and shifting his hips against him? And *Gods,* he smelled so good and—

Snape. Snape would castrate him for this. Harry would never be able to summon him again; he'd never hear the end of how incapable and stupid he was.

"Please, wait."

Voldemort hesitated, but resumed ravishing Harry's neck a second later, pretending he didn't hear his plea. Harry almost couldn't blame him; his voice had come out far weaker than he'd intended, and he really had to stop caressing his chest and clawing at his hair. He dropped both hands and took a deep breath.

"Stop."

This time, Voldemort did. He lifted his head to glare into Harry's eyes, his hostility clear in his face and magic. He made Harry think of a wild animal that had just had its kill taken away.

"What?"

"I… Do you…"

Harry swallowed hard; it was difficult to recall what he'd wanted to say when Voldemort was still gripping him so tightly, crushing their hips together.

"I want to show you something," he finally managed. "But… er, you're going to have to let me go, please."

Voldemort's immediate response was the opposite: he held Harry tighter, his fingers digging into his hipbones. His magic was wild with desire—full of lust for everything, Harry presumed. His body, his soul…

His *love.*

But then he let go, and even took a step away from him. "What is it?" he asked, and while he kept his voice level, his magic told Harry exactly how irate he was.

It didn't help that his pants did absolutely nothing to hide his arousal. Harry ignored all of it as best he could. "Do you remember when… when you were waiting in my room for me not long ago? At night, and I wasn't here, because I'd been out flying… and you were back because you'd found the stone…"

That question did effectively seem to douse some of the burning desire glinting in his magic. "Yes."

"Well… actually, I have a question about that first. You uh, weren't mad, then."

Voldemort stared, looking much madder now. "Why weren't you furious?" Harry continued when he realized he hadn't actually asked anything. "I *left* the manor, without any permission. I snuck out. I could have, I dunno, gone anywhere. But you weren't upset at all…"

"Oh, I was extremely… *upset."*

Harry already regretted asking. Voldemort's magic turned blacker. "You were? But—"

"The moment I saw you weren't here, I reached for you. I knew at once that you were close, because I could feel you so well. You were safe. You were *happy.* You were having thoughts of coming home. I knew you would be here soon… so I waited."

"I… I see," said Harry, shocked at his reasoning. Yet he couldn't help himself. "But *how* were you not mad? At me, at… at anyone?"

It just seemed so wildly out of character for Voldemort not to be furious that Harry would do something so defiant, and even more so that he wouldn't take it out on the Malfoys, who were supposed to be preventing that sort of thing.

But maybe he did take it out on Lucius or Narcissa, Harry thought, *and I just don't know it.* He paid close attention to Voldemort's magic when he answered.

"I could have been angry," Voldemort said calmly. "But you were returning. I had the stone. I knew that, after that night, you would be unable to be harmed. I am not keeping you in chains any longer, Harry… remember?"

His eyes went to Harry's mouth, his aura flashing with *want* again. "I was content to *let you go*… *You* are the one who keeps dragging me

back."

"What—that's not fair," Harry said, pretending he didn't notice the way Voldemort kept blatantly staring at his lips. *"You* showed up all on your own the other day, and—no. This is—that's not what I was trying to say."

Harry took several hasty steps away, shaking his head as he did. "I wanted to say… that night. Don't you wonder where I was?"

"You said you were out flying."

"Well, yeah, but that was obviously a bit of a white lie."

Clearly, Voldemort had not considered it a white lie at all. His magic roiled with venom and his jaw visibly tensed.

Harry answered before he lost his nerve. "I went to the forbidden forest."

Harry might as well have told him he'd gone to a dementor breeding ground. "You *what?"* Voldemort fumed. "Why—?"

"I'm about to tell you!" Harry put up both hands defensively. "There's no point being mad *now,* is there?"

"Finish your little story, and we'll see."

Harry feared he'd made a massive mistake, saying all this, but he was committed, now. "Right, so… I… I went to the forest to go somewhere specific. To the place… to where you were going… where I thought you were going to kill me."

At these words, Voldemort's furious face and magic softened. "Why?"

"To get something. Something that I'd left behind."

Harry's heart began to pound as he crossed the room, wasting no time. Voldemort's magic twisted with curiosity. *I hope this works,* he thought as he opened the drawer.

"This," Harry said simply, despite his racing pulse.

Voldemort's eyes went wide at the sight of his broken ring, his destroyed horcrux. His magic flashed with a mixture of powerful emotions. *"Where—?"*

“Dumbledore gave it to me.”

Harry was sure that Voldemort had never been so shocked in such a short period of time. *Bamboozled,* Harry thought to himself, repressing a smile.

“Dumbledore?”

When Voldemort advanced, reaching, Harry clutched the ring protectively in his palm, holding it to his chest. “Yes, Dumbledore,” he said. “Do you remember that snitch I had in my mokeskin bag? The one you vanished? He left that for me in his will, but I couldn’t figure out what was in it for ages. It said, ‘I open at the close.’ It wasn’t until I learned that I was your horcrux that I managed it. You were right. Dumbledore always expected me to die at your hand.”

Harry unfurled his palm, looking forlornly at the ring. He turned it over once.

Voldemort’s magic was *reeling.* “And why would Dumbledore leave my shattered ring for you...? To find in what he’d hoped would be your final moments?”

“To give me courage when I needed it most,” Harry said quietly, and it wasn’t a lie. Voldemort didn’t need to know it was a hallow. “To remind me what it had all cost. This ring killed him. He went willingly… I could die, too.”

Voldemort was silent. His aura continued to dance with a plethora of emotions, while Harry’s eyes remained fixed on the cracked stone. He turned it again.

“So… I went to get it back, because I dropped it before I faced you, alone. And now…” He looked up to meet Voldemort’s eyes with his own.

“Now I’m asking for your permission to keep it.”

Flabbergasted. Voldemort wasn’t even trying to hide his shocked expressions anymore.

“Why?”

Harry shrugged when he replied, “I have an affection for broken and damaged things.”

All at once, Voldemort's convoluting magic stilled. Harry turned the stone a third time.

Snape said nothing when he appeared, as silent as a shadow. He stood in the furthest corner of the room, behind Voldemort, his arms crossed. His dark eyes were watching Harry with something that *might* have been approval.

"…I see."

When Voldemort approached Harry again, this time much less antagonistically, Harry allowed it. When he reached for Harry's wrist to pull it towards him, cupping his hand beneath Harry's splayed palm, he allowed that, too.

His long, pale fingers traced the gold of the ring, and Harry was certain he was about to snatch it away. He didn't.

"Does it make you think of *Dumbledore,* when you look at it now?" he asked, his magic shaking in a way that made Harry think he didn't like asking about it, but couldn't help himself.

"No," Harry answered. "Of course not… It makes me think of you."

It was the obvious, and only, response. Voldemort's dark aura warmed, and his posture straightened, preening. He folded Harry's fingers back around the ring. "Keep it," he said. "It is yours."

"Thank you."

Harry tilted his head back, preparing to kiss him again, but Voldemort grabbed his chin tightly. "Going to the forbidden forest at night, alone, was reckless even for *you,* Harry."

Despite his narrowed eyes, his magic remained warm, and Harry knew he wasn't really mad any longer. "Yeah… worth it, though."

Voldemort's lips curled despite himself. His eyes closed when Harry leaned in, and in the moment before he caught him in another kiss, he cast a smug look over his shoulder where Snape watched.

Moving slowly and looking begrudgingly impressed, Snape clapped for him. Once. It made no sound.

I'm not naive, Harry thought, the ring still in his fist. *I know what I'm doing… sometimes.*

“Don’t get cocky, Potter,” Snape said. “You’re going to be in over your head again in seconds.”

“Permission?”

Harry said the word with his lips barely grazing Voldemort’s. The response he got was the one he’d anticipated and hoped for—Voldemort’s face was convincingly detached, but his aura swelled with immediate turmoil. *Want*, instant want, because he always wanted, but also a conflicted and terrible guilt, almost fear.

“You haven’t broken your promise, have you?” Harry asked, looking into his eyes. “You haven’t used any Unforgivables recently… have you?”

Voldemort, almost imperceptibly, shook his head.

“Then it will be fine. You were different, then… You were hurting. Now, you’re not. Right?”

Voldemort’s nod was even less clear, but Harry knew.

“Then let me…”

Harry took Voldemort’s closed eyes and soft kiss as a sign of consent. Light blossomed between them, as sweet and light as Harry could make it, and Voldemort sighed contentedly against his lips.

“This is as far as you should take this,” Snape warned. “End this, now.”

Harry heard the words, he did, but he found it hard to make them matter when such a lovely warmth was thrumming in his heart. Voldemort was guiding him backwards, dragging him towards the bed; he was pulling Harry onto his lap and moaning into his mouth as he once more pushed past the seam of his lips with his tongue…

“W-we…”

Harry got one word out before Voldemort, unbothered when Harry jerked his head away, started to kiss his neck, just as he had been doing before. Harry’s eyes fluttered and closed, and he breathed in the scent of something woodsy, like pine, like the forest he shouldn’t have flown off to in the middle of the night, alone.

“Potter.”

Harry forced himself to open his eyes. Nothing was as sobering as a deceased Snape staring in such a judgmental way.

“We shouldn’t do this,” Harry said, his voice as unconvincing as could be.

“Mmmm…”

Voldemort didn’t take it seriously, either. He only moved to kiss the other side of Harry’s neck instead, using his teeth, sucking harder than before.

“Ah—I mean it,” Harry said, but his fingers had somehow found their way into Voldemort’s hair again, pulling him closer, not pushing him away. “I don’t think—this isn’t… we should—”

Harry inhaled a sharp breath when Voldemort reached between his legs, and it was as though all the blood in Harry’s body instantly flowed to his touch. “Shouldn’t… what,” Voldemort murmured.

“I don’t think that we should have sex!” Harry blurted out, loudly.

The light vanished. Harry imagined his face would have flushed if his blood flow wasn't already preoccupied, his cock hardening in Voldemort’s hand.

Baffled. Flabbergasted. Bamboozled.

Voldemort looked like he was at his wits’ end with Harry’s behavior.

“I j-just don’t think—I think maybe we need a b-break from that…”

Voldemort’s magic turned dark, scarily fast. He leaned his head against Harry’s chest when he said, “Do you?”

“Not because I don’t *want* to,” Harry went on, for he could see the blackness of turmoil, of being rejected, curling around him. “But, um…”

Why did he not want to do this again?

“Because it is clouding your ability to understand your *feelings,”* Snape drawled. “Because it makes it difficult to know where your heart lies, untethered to feelings of lust.”

Well, I’d never say that, Harry thought, annoyed, but it was helpful.

“Because it’s… confusing, sometimes,” Harry said. “I-I… I don’t know… I can’t tell whose feelings are whose, and it’s… it makes it hard to know.”

He pulled Voldemort’s face away from his chest, both hands on his cheeks, the ring pressed against his skin. “And I want to know,” he finished.

Voldemort’s magic remained dark, but it was less brooding when Harry forced a smile and kissed him again—lightly.

“Good,” said Snape. “Now do what you know you need to do and make him *sleep.”*

Right, Harry thought bitterly. *Just make the Dark Lord accept a request of abstinence and put him to bed. Even easier than getting him to swear off Unforgivables.*

At first, he thought it might be. Voldemort didn’t say anything, but he did allow Harry to push him back, to keep their kiss innocent. Then Harry realized the awkward predicament he was in. Voldemort might have been dressed comfortably, but he, Harry, was in his regular day robes.

“You should have changed earlier,” Snape said dryly.

Deciding he was no longer helpful, Harry went to place the ring on the bedside table. “Don’t,” Snape said sharply. “You won’t last a minute on your own.”

Harry glared and slammed the ring down—harshly. Snape disappeared. Voldemort looked at Harry with one brow raised.

“Will you stay?” Harry said, thinking the best strategy to explain why he was being aggressive with a broken ring he’d said he wanted was… distraction. He placed a hand back on Voldemort’s face, feeling foolish as he gave him his most pleading—hopefully, alluring—look.

“Please?”

He let the light bloom again. The angst in Voldemort’s magic vanished at once, the gold glinting in a subdued way. He wrapped his arms around Harry’s waist and let out a contented sound. He even closed his eyes.

It’s almost too easy, Harry thought, grinning with his chin resting on

his shoulder.

“Is it?”

A wave of fear crashed over Harry. Of course. Voldemort could hear his thoughts. It was simple for him when they were like this.

Harry tried to disrupt the connection between them, but found it suddenly hard to do so. Voldemort’s smile was twisted, telling Harry that *he* was now keeping it in place.

“I didn’t mean—”

“So easy, is it, to control me, Harry…? Show me *just* how easy it is.”

He moved with an inhuman speed, flipping Harry onto his back beneath him. Harry glanced pleadingly at the ring, but it was now far from his reach.

“Wait,” Harry said, for Voldemort’s hand was sliding down his chest, opening the buttons of his shirt without so much as a muttered incantation. The light was growing stronger; Harry couldn’t focus. “Wait—please. I really don’t think—”

“And why not?” Voldemort kissed the hollow of his throat, dragging his tongue down onto his chest. “Why deny yourself? You’re *Harry Potter*… you should deny yourself nothing.”

His smile was savage. Voldemort truly was a master of taking Harry’s own words and throwing them back at him, leaving him speechless.

“But you claim it *confuses* you… I think you’re lying, Harry. I think you know *exactly* how you feel.”

He kept his focus on Harry’s face when his tongue darted out, licking the scar from the locket. Harry shuddered.

“I can tell,” Voldemort purred. “You may be confused, but I’m not… I have no problems distinguishing my feelings from yours… and right now *you…”*

He pushed Harry’s shirt wide open; his hands were at the hem of Harry’s pants.

“...feel very…”

He pulled down, and Harry, against all logic, did nothing at all to stop

him. He only stared, his heart thundering, heat pooling low in his gut.

Voldemort never finished his sentence—he didn't have to. Harry's cock was half hard when Voldemort freed it, and when he laughed, his breath dancing across the delicate skin of its head, it grew harder.

"I can help you, Harry," Voldemort murmured with his lips against his length. "I can tell you exactly how you feel, at any given time… I know you, Harry. Better than anyone."

Harry sucked in a breath when Voldemort's tongue slid up his length, making him fully hard with a single swipe. "What you feel most of all, most often, even still… is *guilt."*

Harry hadn't expected that. When the light vanished a second later, his head cleared further. "What?"

Voldemort kissed his chest and crawled over his body, not stopping until his face hovered over Harry's own. "You still brim with guilt, with fear, with worry… with *responsibility*… all the time. Every day, every night." He kissed Harry's cheek, strangely soft. "It's so exhausting, Harry… the way you relentlessly want to save everyone, no matter what. You must be so tired."

His magic dimmed and glistened in a sultry way; Harry had no idea what to make of it alongside the words he was saying.

"It's *over,* my sweetness; you've said it yourself. I've won everything. The war, the Ministry… *you.* You owe the world—the wretched world that turned its back on you time and time again—nothing. You don't need to save me, and you don't need to save them. You don't owe *anyone* a single thing."

He kissed Harry's neck again, then nuzzled into it, his other hand tracing the scar on his chest. "I know you think you do. I know that, despite everything I've told you, you continue to convince yourself that you can still be the hero they want, the martyr you never asked to be… You carry such a weight on your shoulders, Harry, because you've never known how not to."

He lowered his hand and caressed Harry's cock, a single finger trailing up, then down. Harry hated how such a light touch made his hips jut forward, made him bite his lower lip to keep from whimpering.

"Let me carry it," Voldemort said in Harry's ear. "Let me take that crushing burden off you, my light… all you need to be—all you've

ever needed to be—is *mine."*

The following kiss was slow, deep and penetrating. His tongue dove in and demanded *everything*, and Harry, unsure what was happening to him, craned his back and allowed it, welcomed it, *wanted* it.

Harry's arms were suddenly pinned over his head, held fast against the headboard by—Harry's heart stuttered—thick, heavy ropes. They bound his wrists together and, when he pulled even slightly, burned into his skin. The helplessness sent a thrill through him; Harry's pulse sped faster, and his hips bucked against nothing, seeking everything.

Do I need to tell you how you feel now…?

Voldemort's voice was like velvet in his mind, smooth, seductive, and taunting. Harry felt Voldemort's mouth curve into a smile against his as he shifted, disrobing. The soft fabric brushed Harry's arms as it fell from his shoulders; the silk of his pants was cool and smooth as it slid against his thighs.

When Voldemort finally broke away he was naked, his legs between Harry's. His lust-heavy magic was debilitating.

"So give yourself to me, every part of you… Surrender, Harry…" He stroked Harry's length again, infuriatingly slow and light. "Stop being so determined to *change* me, to *save* everyone…"

Another gentle touch, this time with the pad of his thumb against the tip of Harry's cock. Harry failed to hold back a cry, then—a desperate whine, and *Gods,* why was that so… so…

"Because it is what you want."

Voldemort's magic flashed knowingly—superior and vain as could be. "You might not admit it to yourself, but you *want* to wash your hands of the fate you've been forced to accept. So do it."

Another kiss to his neck. Voldemort's magic flooded over him, a familiar sensation. Harry's lower half went limp. When he tried to move his legs and hips, he couldn't. It didn't frighten him, despite the manipulative words Voldemort was feeding him while taking such unfair control, despite the way he had pulled Harry's legs up, spreading him wide, lining up and preparing to take him.

"Surrender," he demanded again. His cock pressed against his entrance, which was slick now, the result of that same, sinful magic.

“Say yes…”

Harry didn’t know what he was agreeing to. He only knew that he wanted it; he wanted all of Voldemort’s empty promises, all the weight, gone. He wanted to feel nothing but that searing, blinding bliss, the likes of which only Voldemort could provide.

When he was like this, surrendering was inevitable.

“Please,” Harry breathed. “Please, yes—”

Voldemort drove in, burying himself in a single, deep stroke. Light bloomed, an immediate and unstoppable wave of it, crashing and flowing, making Harry’s ears ring with mind-numbing pleasure.

“Yesss…”

Harry dimly registered the Parseltongue being hissed into his ear as Voldemort rocked into him, a deep, steady pace. His teeth sank into the soft flesh at the base of Harry’s neck, and as he ravished him there, Harry looked up, fascinated.

In the mirror above his bed, Voldemort fucked him. Harry could see his muscles contract with every forward thrust of his hips, could see the way his spine arched so beautifully. He saw the way his own wrists were bound, keeping him exposed and entirely at Voldemort’s mercy.

He’s so…

There wasn’t a word strong enough that came to mind. Voldemort was unfairly, inhumanely *beautiful.* His mouth on Harry’s neck was heaven, and his *cock,* the way he drove into him, striking someplace deep that made Harry’s body sing with pleasure, again and again, fireworks of gold exploding in the back corners of his mind…

“Ah… Yes, please, *Tom—”*

Voldemort didn’t stop fucking him altogether, but he slowed, and his magic flashed perilously. The light lessened. He grabbed Harry’s neck and gripped it, hard, threatening to cut off his air.

“I *hate* that name,” Voldemort whispered, each word dripping with malice. He buried himself deeply again, making Harry squirm in pleasure at the sensation of simultaneously being filled and nearly choked—despite the dread he knew he should be feeling.

“Sorry,” he managed to whisper, his throat bobbing beneath Voldemort’s fingers. Voldemort leaned further against him, his chest now rubbing against Harry’s aching, neglected cock.

“I hate it *less*… coming from you, when you say it like that.”

Voldemort admitted it as though it enraged him, the truth of it. His magic was both pleased and angry, billowing with a want and a vitriol that were equally powerful.

“I…” Harry had no clue what he was supposed to say. He took a deep breath—a difficult task, for Voldemort’s grip wasn’t softening—before asking, “Should I n-not say it, then?”

Because it felt very important that he know. Voldemort didn’t answer at once. His magic twisted in conflict for a long moment and he bit Harry’s ear, gently, before he spoke. “You can say it… if we’re alone.” Another bite, harder. “If you ever call me that in front of others again, I’ll kill them for the privilege of having heard it from your lips.”

He looked into Harry’s eyes. “Do you understand?” Harry nodded. “Good.” Voldemort then released Harry’s throat and began to fuck him harder and faster than before.

It was like someone had slapped him. Even though that blissful warmth once more grew bright, flowing between them, Harry felt colder, sharper. He had no problem believing that Voldemort, despite all his previous declarations that no one else needed to die, would indeed kill anyone and everyone if Harry dared to call him Tom in public. He might murder more of his own Death Eaters, even, purely out of spite, just to tell Harry it was his fault. It was a stark reminder that Voldemort, no matter how beautiful he might have become, no matter how much he might have begun to change, was still a murderer at heart.

A monster.

Part of Harry was horrified, knowing that he could say a word and doom countless people…

But another part of him… knowing he really could have Lord Voldemort, in more ways than one, *on a leash*…

Do you think you could keep hold of it? I am very *strong.*

“Tom,” Harry said, pulling against the ropes. *“Tom…”*

Voldemort's magic convulsed, as uncertain and writhing as Harry's own heart felt. He hated it, hearing Harry sigh that name.

He *loved* it.

"Please, don't stop, I… *ah…"*

When Harry let out a particularly harsh sound, so close to unraveling, Voldemort lost it, instantly. His magic twisted and coiled, like Harry's groan had done something to him that not even Voldemort had anticipated, and he shuddered, moaning—

He came, pushing himself deeply into Harry, low and throaty cries pouring out of his mouth. Harry didn't experience it the way he did; he stayed in his own body, left instead to feel Voldemort's cock as it throbbed inside him, to watch his reflection, his muscles spasming in the mirror as he buried himself deeper, and deeper still.

The light swelled, radiant. Voldemort's magic was a shower of gold.

Throughout it all, Harry squirmed.

"Please—please, I can't, I need—"

Harry was infuriatingly close as Voldemort now rocked gently into him, coming down from his own long, satisfying release. He tried and failed to buck his hips forward, seeking any kind of friction against his cock, but he still couldn't move the lower half of his body. His arms, too, remained pinned above his head; his wrists burning as he struggled.

"Please…"

Voldemort came back to himself, opening his eyes to reveal full-blown pupils that were clouded with lust. His magic settled into something less chaotic, a swath of placated gold and black like a dark sunrise around him. When he pushed himself up, kneeling between Harry's legs, still buried deep, Harry couldn't decide what he looked like more —an angel, a demon. A frightening God.

Voldemort's hazy eyes went from Harry's face to his cock, which was excruciatingly hard, its tip weeping pearlescent tears that trailed slowly down its length. He pulled out, making Harry shudder with the parts of his body he could control. Voldemort's seed spilled out of him, and he watched it trickle out, mesmerized by Harry's leaking, desperate body.

Harry was on the verge of screaming.

“Please—I *need—please!”*

Harry didn’t know what to beg for; he wanted, needed, anything—more than Voldemort’s covetous gaze. He yanked hard on his constraints again, his skin turning raw with pain. Hot tears welled in the corners of his eyes.

“P-please…”

Voldemort finally seemed to hear him. His eyes went to Harry’s before he smiled, a small and terrible curling of his lips. Then he lowered himself, slowly, and with the briefest flicker of his tongue, lapped at the head of Harry’s swollen cock.

Harry’s spine arched. He gasped and trembled and *moaned.*

Voldemort said nothing, but his magic shone with a tumultuous arrogance. Harry hardly cared. His eyes were locked on Voldemort’s mouth, which hovered just over his cock, tantalizingly close, and there wasn’t room for a single thought other than: *Yes, please, yes. Please do it. Please don’t stop.*

When Voldemort dragged his tongue up, lapping up the line of translucent fluid that had seeped out, Harry threw his head back, letting out a strangled sound. The light escalated, bursting at the point where Voldemort licked him, making Harry’s whole world tilt on its axis.

Above him, in the mirror, Harry saw himself—flushed, breathless, bound. His neck was covered in the marks left by Voldemort’s vicious mouth, yet to heal from the elixir.

Harry had never looked or felt more powerless, not even when he’d been bound in the Ministry in Courtroom Ten.

He hated it.

He *loved* it.

Voldemort pressed his lips against the tip of Harry’s cock, which were so soft and plush on the delicate skin. More than anything in the world, Harry wished he could lift his hips up; he would do *anything* to feel his mouth on him, around him, *now.* To have Voldemort lavishing him until he was spilling out on his tongue.

“P…pl…”

He couldn’t get the word out to beg any longer—between heavy pants, all Harry could manage were pitiful, broken cries. For once, Voldemort didn’t respond with some condescending remarks in his mind. The Dark Lord, so slowly that it might have been the most evil act he’d ever committed, parted his full lips around the head of Harry’s weeping cock, and sucked.

It was the lightest pressure, and he took less than an inch of Harry’s length into his mouth, but it was enough to make Harry let out another garbled cry. His eyes closed, and his head collided roughly with the headboard.

Yes, more—more…

Voldemort’s tongue slid down first, coating the underside of his cock, and his mouth followed. He seemed determined to drive Harry insane with how slowly he took him, and it was working. Harry thrashed against his bindings, furious that he could do nothing to make him move faster, to take him deeper.

Please please please please—

The Dark Lord’s magic rolled over him like a current, as tantalizing as his tongue, which moved incrementally lower. The light was growing stronger, too strong, dizzyingly so.

Harry didn’t care. Not at all.

Voldemort finally stopped in his maddening descent; Harry felt his cock brush against what must have been the back of his throat. He swallowed around Harry’s length, sucking, and *oh—*

Yes, take me, Harry thought, trying and failing again to jut his hips forward and back, to fuck the Dark Lord’s gloriously wet, warm mouth...

Take all of me, everything—drain me fucking dry—

At that thought, Voldemort moaned, the sound vibrating around his cock, and Harry nearly came at once. The blissful warmth grew infinitely stronger; Harry’s body felt weightless. He watched through eyes he could barely open, entranced as he witnessed Voldemort, one pale hand splayed against Harry’s stomach, start to move with vigor. His head lifted, sucking greedily, then he lowered himself, wrapping

his tongue around him as he did, and he wasn't stopping—*don't stop, please, yes, more, yes—*

There was nothing Harry wouldn't do to keep Voldemort there, draining every part of him until he finally—finally—reached his release. He'd scream the name *Tom* in the Ministry of Magic, damning everyone there if he had to, because nothing else mattered then, *nothing.*

Harry was on the razor's edge as Voldemort moaned again, taking him deeper.

YES—

It was a dam breaking, a devastating rush. The light burst, cataclysmic, turning the world vibrant gold. Harry's voice broke and shattered into a silent scream as he came, Voldemort's hot, perfect mouth never leaving, doing everything Harry demanded of him—swallowing, drinking.

Draining him dry.

Yes… so good, Harry…

Voldemort's voice was a silky, seductive purr in Harry's mind. He continued to suck his cock hungrily, lapping against the head, eliciting *more*. The sensation of his eager mouth and tongue, along with the brilliant warmth of their connected souls, soon became unbearable. Harry whimpered as he watched him work, relentless. Harry had nothing left to give—his spent cock began to soften despite Voldemort's aggressive ministrations—but he didn't seem to care. The light kept building, and that dark and toxic *want* crept in, causing Harry to shiver.

"Stop," Harry said breathlessly, still incapable of moving his hips or legs. "Stop, Tom—it's too—you're too…"

He momentarily lost his train of thought as Voldemort finally released his cock, which then fell against his thigh, utterly spent. The Dark Lord kissed its tip, so sweetly, then started to kiss Harry's hips. The light lessened, nearly disappearing. Only the barest hum of warmth flowed between them.

There was another cool sweeping of magic on his legs. Harry wiggled his toes, confirming that he could move his entire body again, but had absolutely no will to. He felt like his bones had been removed. He was

buzzy, floaty. Like a cloud.

The ropes vanished. Harry's arms fell to his sides on the bed, and he felt as incapable of moving them as anything else. His wrists were bloodied and red. They started to tingle, and Harry knew they would soon heal.

Voldemort crawled over him, kissing Harry's chest as he gradually made his way higher. His aura was dazzling with more gold than Harry knew it should have, and he could tell by the way he struggled so much to keep his eyes open that Voldemort had taken too much—that tomorrow he'd be feeling the consequences. *Again.*

"I had to," Voldemort murmured, having now made it up to Harry's shoulders. He lapped at his collarbone. "You *begged* me…"

There was barely a trace of guilt.

Harry had no energy left to figure out if he was mad or not. He *had* begged him to; he would have done anything.

"Mmm," Harry hummed vaguely as Voldemort's lips made it to his abused neck. He'd probably be upset later, he mused, but now he couldn't feel anything other than a rush of contentment. It was easily the most gratifying orgasm he'd ever experienced, and he knew he'd pay the price again in an instant if he had to.

The Dark Lord is temptation incarnate.

Voldemort laughed against Harry's ear as though privy to the thought—because he was, of course.

"Stay," Harry managed to whisper, even though his eyes had closed and opening them again felt impossible. "Please…"

Voldemort didn't say anything, only curled an arm around Harry's waist, pulling him tighter. With what seemed to take a Herculean effort, Harry managed to rest his head against Voldemort's chest—as though the small action might guarantee that he'd stay and sleep. Harry inhaled the scent of pine and sighed.

Voldemort let out another soft laugh. Then, without a single further coherent thought, Harry drifted off into a deep sleep.

Chapter End Notes

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